

# A CRUSADER OF FRANCE







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THE LETTERS OF  
CAPTAIN FERDINAND BELMONT  
OF THE CHASSEURS ALPINS

(August 2, 1914—December 28, 1915)

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY  
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WITH A FOREWORD BY  
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## **FOREWORD**



## FOREWORD

### I

A PEASANT of Savoy heard of the death of the second of his sons, killed in the Vosges, as he was setting forth to the fields for the autumn ploughing. The oxen were yoked in front of the house. The post-man handed him the letter bearing the heading of the Prefecture. He went into the house to fetch his spectacles, read in the presence of his wife, who, anxious, had followed him, and in that of the neighbours, who already knew the news, and then, handing the paper to the companion of his life of labour, said simply:

“God found them ready.”

He added slowly:

“My poor wife! . . .”

And he went off to his ploughing.

*God found them ready.* It seems indeed as though these young people were prepared. Among the already voluminous evidence which comes from them—letters, notebooks, disclosures—it is not rare to detect a sort of joyous detachment which raises them from the earth. They feel that they have received a call, and they offer themselves like the daughter of Jephthah, who ran towards her father

and was in no way astonished at the sacrifice demanded of her. So, unswervingly, they go forth to war and rise on high, like those trees with smooth, slender boles which, towering in the forest in search of light, seem unattached to the soil, whereas more ancient trunks hold on desperately by multitudinous roots.

Sergeant Léo Latil, of Aix-en-Provence (1890-1915), who was killed in the Champagne offensive,<sup>1</sup> expresses astonishment at the state of sublime peace and often joy in which he finds himself. "Sacrifices will be light indeed," he wrote to his kindred, "if we gain a right glorious victory and more light for souls. . . ." His will, drawn before his departure, ends with this earnest request: "Pray for France, work for France, raise her up!"

Long before the war there was being effected in these young men, or at any rate among the flower of them, a simplification of life. Ambition did not tempt them. They were not to be turned aside by an ordinary lot, because they placed above everything else that interior discipline which utilizes contingencies by accepting them, instead of revolting against them, or trying to overcome them. Young Frenchmen who reached the age of twenty in 1890, were the too unconcerned prey of every intellectual ferment. Those of 1900 showed themselves to be more practical, to have a greater leaning toward realities. Those of 1910, like those birds which, detecting the coming storm, stretch out their wings in order to dash into it the better, hardened themselves physically and morally, exer-

<sup>1</sup>See the *Correspondent*, January 25, 1916.

cised their muscles and forged, for current use, either athletic stoicism or religious acceptance.

Maurice Ernst (1889–1914), the son of the *savant* and enthusiastic art critic, Alfred Ernst, on reaching the age to choose a career, deliberately turned towards the provinces—he who was a *déraciné*, born of an Alsatian father and a Savoyard mother, and educated first at Paris, then at Dijon. Paris did not attract him—that Paris which all the younger novelists represent to us as the great delusion and the cause of so many misled lives. His mother's native province retained him because there he could more easily be himself. “I shall go and settle down at Chambéry, or in another town of the same character,” he wrote, “because I feel attracted by the life of a provincial barrister—a life which is often not very brilliant, doubtless, but which enables one to remain in daily contact with the veritable element in which our national moral temperament is formed. It is very different to the life, in spite of everything very artificial, which people are almost fatally bound to lead at Paris, or in a very big town.” He was especially anxious to live his inner, his religious life profoundly. Is not this a new tendency in quite young men? Pride and ambition, the usual levers of youth, have been transformed into inward discipline and the sense of fellowship. Maurice Ernst, after two years' military service, aspired to the life of an officer, which would enable him to command men, but first of all to govern himself; and it was in this state of mind that the war found him. At peace with himself, he set out, rejoicing that the war, provoked by the enemy, was an opportunity

for serving a splendid human cause. His letters from the front to his mother are quite on a level with the great tragedy. He was calm and ready. "I cannot say whether we shall see each other again," he dared to write, so surrounded by death did he feel. "At all events, I am living splendid hours at the present time, even before I have fought. To have the command of sixty men for whom one is responsible unto death, and whose minds are sustained and movements guided by the clearness of an order, is a rare joy. *But it is a still greater joy to feel that one may be called upon to die on the first day perhaps.* That gives one a feeling of solemn and gentle serenity at the same time which must, if one escapes, leave its mark on one's whole life." His presentiment did not mislead him: he was killed at Ethe, in Belgium, on the morning of August 22, 1914, by a bullet in the head, as he was triumphantly entering the village.<sup>1</sup> From that open, luminous brain, thoughts must have flown straight on high.

The letters of Captain Belmont, which appear in the following pages, reveal, I believe, the most complete example of this *jeunesse*, precociously ripened long before the war, like a vine exposed to the sun, and for which the war will have been the vintage-time. They will be read for many a long year, as were read and are still the letters composing *le Récit d'une sœur*, or as the Journal and Correspondence of Maurice and Eugénie de Guérin, for their sincerity, their familiar and provincial flavour, their profound intimacy, their feeling for

<sup>1</sup>*Bulletin de l'Ecole Saint-François de Sales de Dijon,*  
April 1, 1916.

nature, their religious fervour. But there is something new in their accent. Death straddles over them, as the arch of a bridge over running water. Within the curve a fragment of heaven is reflected and the water shivers.

Under the title of captain we formerly imagined a man of thirty—a man of experience, accustomed to command. Belmont was a captain of twenty-four, who, when war broke out, was a sub-lieutenant of the reserve. Lyons—"the industrial and mystic town," as Alphonse Daudet called it—was his birthplace, but his family, shortly after he was born, settled at Grenoble, where his father is manager of an important bank. The horizon of the Dauphine Alps was the horizon of his childhood, that which trained his eyes, that which he constantly evokes when seeking comparisons for some beautiful vision of autumn or spring. And yet Lyons left upon him that very particular impress with which the ancient city of two rivers marks its inhabitants. The fogs which hang over the Saône and the Rhône compel them, it seems, to live more within themselves. Silence reigns on the streets, sadness and coldness are on people's faces. But, should the bells of Fourvières ring, their features light up, as though these bells were announcing great news. On clear evenings one can distinguish far in the distance the chain of Mont Blanc, and people do not fail to seek for that indistinct sinuous line which floats like lace knotted to the flowers of the sunset. The Lyons section of the Alpine Club is one of the most numerous and most daring. The business-men, manufacturers and clerks of the city who on six

days of the week stick close to their somnolent quays and dark offices, swarm on Sunday on the slopes of the Alps, hasten to the mountains as to a lover's meeting-place. Who has written more finely of this than an inhabitant of Lyons, Théodore Camus, in his posthumous book: *De la Montagne au Désert?*

The mountains, in Ferdinand Belmont's letters, are faithful friends, the recollection of whom he treasures. He loves to recall the ascensions he made with his brother Jean in the Chartreuse Chain, at Belledonne, and on all his beloved summits of the Dauphine Alps. As a connoisseur, he evokes the quality of the air one breathes there, the play of light and shade which follow one on the other, and especially the solitude—the serenity of that solitude. He belonged to one of those numerous families of which one must have been an actual member to know all the joy, animation and expansion a childhood can contain, and all the majesty, equity, divine order and human tenderness a father and mother represent. He who did not wish to regret anything in the course of his moral ascension had a heavy heart when he thought of his home in the country and everybody there: his parents, six brothers and a sister. His eldest brother, Émile, two or three years his senior, died at seventeen from the effects of an attack of scarlatina, contracted when he was eleven. The few notes which this youth left behind show him to have been a precocious emulator of Adèle Kamm, who cultivated pain like a garden, in which she grew the joy of immolation. “Suffering came from day to day,”

he wrote, when kept to his bed by illness. "I strove hard to accept it, and now I am happy to have suffered." And again: "Of all the ways of serving God, illness is the one which allows the least consolation, but the little one is able to receive is only of greater worth." As soon as he was afflicted he succeeded in ceasing to ask for a return of health, and contented himself with the life of the soul. There can be no doubt that he enabled his brother Ferdinand—surprised to see him so resigned—to penetrate further into this life. Without knowing it, he was preparing him for future trial, and the younger brother in his turn was to experience purification through daily acceptance.

At an early date Ferdinand showed a strong liking for the medical profession. After brilliant studies, he anticipated the call to the army, and at eighteen joined the 14th Infantry Battalion, with which he did his two years service, having no inclination for duty in an army medical corps. He left his battalion a sub-lieutenant of the reserve and took up his abode at Lyons to attend the lectures on medicine. At twenty-one years of age he came out second in the competitive examination for surgical assistants. At twenty-three he was an assistant dresser. And it was from this post that the mobilization took him.

"This somewhat reserved and melancholy, but most Christian, most reflective, and kindly young man," writes to me one of his best friends, the Abbé, now Lieutenant Gonnet, "possessed a most engaging disposition. It seemed as though his gaze ever remained fixed on those who had understood its

charm. As regards myself, I feel it ever bent upon me, as on the last occasion I saw him, at Gérardmer, in August, 1915, when he came (himself wounded) to look after me and bring me delicacies, as a mother would have done. He must have been somewhat like that in the case of his men—kindly in the exercise of authority, but knowing how to be master of them, knowing how to elevate their souls to the height his own had risen, at any rate on great occasions. And this will indeed be one of the established facts of this war among the thousand and one forms authority has taken—as though all materials can be used to fashion it, on condition they are supple and tractable in the hands of the Maker. . . . The change which the war seems to me to have brought about in him most clearly is a simplification of the soul and its tendencies. He had attained so great a unity of life and mental absorption that God alone could bring that unity to its natural centre, by attracting it to Him. I did not always know him thus, but inspired with a love for the ideal and great things, and striving a little in his dull life as a student to bring to it that which then seemed to him so difficult to find and which the ordeal of war placed within his reach daily, until the end. He speaks a good deal of that romanticism which attracted so many young men, to whom the war brought natural satisfaction. He hardly confessed it, but I believe that he also had very romantic tendencies. Only he accepted the ordeal with all its tribulations, whereas many others found it severe and wearisome to the flesh, and sought to lighten it.”

At the present moment I am endeavouring above all to find the Ferdinand Belmont of pre-war days: the being whom the war was to bring to life again in his letters. I imagine him to have been somewhat uncommunicative, doubtless, but not sad. He was one of those taciturn people who delight in inward joys. The long illness of his eldest brother, his own disposition, a precocious perception of the seriousness of life, led, without making him gloomy, to meditative habits. More luminous are the spots made by the sun in the underwood. The laughter of rather serious young men is all the more cheerful and loud. In the refuges on the Alps and at his home in the country Ferdinand Belmont's laughter must thus have burst forth, surprising and charming. The romanticism of youth arises the more often from the difficulty of finding its balance: the restless mind is dissatisfied with everything, the unpeased heart believes that it is misunderstood. In the case of the twenty-year-old Belmont there is hesitation between contemplation and action. He recognized his vocation at a very early date, walked straight along his path; and yet, on the other hand, was he anxious over the result? He was never so happy as when pausing on his path, regarding nature, and allowing his thoughts to wander. The war was to bestow harmony upon him.

Of his younger brothers, Jean, the nearest in age to himself, was his companion when on excursions. Without ambition, modest, charitable, cheerful and frank, this tall robust youth was an enthusiastic mountaineer. A preparatory pupil at the

Grenoble Polytechnic Institute, and momentarily excused from military service at the time of the outbreak of war, he offered his services and was incorporated on August 11 in the 22nd Infantry Regiment. A fortnight later he asked to leave for the front, on the plea that he was in fine training and on account of his physical vigour. He was killed in his first fight, on August 29, 1914, at the Pass of Anozel, near Saint-Dié. The day before he had by chance met his brother Ferdinand, during the retreat. Jean Belmont was devoid of all complexity, was as ingenuous as a child, and totally indifferent to risk. On the point of departure, he said to his mother, quite calmly: "I have nothing to fear. The worst that can happen to me is to be killed, and to die for a noble cause when one is young is a great blessing."

The next brother, Joseph, was more impressionable and earnest. A boarder at Bollengo, in Italy, he was unable to accustom himself to separation from his family. Then, suddenly, he got over his troubles; he had discovered his path in life. At the close of his year's study of philosophy he entered the Issy seminary. When war was declared he was devoting himself at Mens to the care of a holiday colony of little boys. Mobilized in December (1914), he was incorporated in the 55th Infantry Regiment and placed in the firing line in the month of May, with the 173rd Regiment. He went through the severe engagement of Éparges and the Bois de la Gruerie, was promoted corporal, and never ceased to sustain those surrounding him by his good humour and high spirits, although it cost him

dear to lead an existence so different from the one he had desired. On July 2 he was killed by a bullet and fell without a cry.

"In one's life at the front," he wrote to his parents, "one must live the present without thinking of the future. To be nearer danger and death is to be nearer God, and therefore why pity us? Put your trust in God! everything happens according to His will, and it is ever for the best. My only duty is to do what I ought to do, whatever it may be and to the end. This life in proximity with death has many beautiful sides to it. I hope to find tranquillity in it, as so many heroes have found, when I am absolutely convinced that death is happiness, suffering a merit, danger and trial a splendid lesson in energy, which will cast glory over my whole life if I know how to render it sufficiently fruitful."

Ferdinand survived Joseph Belmont by a few months. A captain, decorated with the Legion of Honour, and mentioned three times in army orders, he was killed on December 28, 1915, at the Hartmannsweilerkopf.

These three brothers, "God found them ready"—as the Savoyard peasant said. At each fresh blow the father of these three young heroes might have repeated those words, as beautiful and as strong as a verse of the Bible, but each time with more bitter sorrow. The first who left did it so simply. The second already belonged to God. But can such a loss as the third—the eldest, the most richly endowed, the most complete, the surest heir

of a tradition to be transmitted, the one who inspired no more love than the others, but on whom they counted for that continuance of the family which is man's terrestrial immortality—leave sufficient courage to continue the task begun? Yes indeed, and even a fourth child, Maxime, has filled the vacant place in the army. There are also hearts which sorrow always finds ready, because divine hope inhabits them.

This long war, now violent, now less intense, has revealed and especially will reveal many writers, through the tragic scenes presented to the eyes, through the habit of meditation which long hours in the trenches have created or fortified, through the need or the desire to correspond with loved ones at home and give them an accurate idea either of the outer or the inner life. But many among them will not be witnesses of their celebrity, will never know how hearts have thrilled under their action as strings vibrate under the bow. The letters of Ferdinand Belmont reveal that gift of seeing, that art of seizing the essential features of a scene or picture, whilst neglecting or rejecting the useless and the superfluous, that colour at once warm and discreet, the perfection of which makes a Fromentin. Who can forget, having read *Un Été dans le Sahara*, the supple gait of that barefooted Arab woman whom we see coming from the remoteness of the horizon, as in biblical times, bearing an amphora on her shoulder, or that Eastern evening in front of the tent, so full of peace that the very silence can be heard? And yet it is not that—a vision of war—which will be most sought for in this correspondence. No, it is not that which will bring Cap-

tain Belmont faithful and transmissible friendships, but indeed the work of moral chasing to which he incessantly devoted himself. There is in him both a poet and a philosopher—a poet and a philosopher in the manner of a De Vigny, whose thought was tinged with delicate penetration and sorrow—and there is in him above all a believer who succeeds in casting his actions, his strength, his soul into faith, as into a broadbosomed river which he allows to carry him away. What matter life and death, provided one believes, is the cry to which he rallies, and which he will make the subject of his reflections, not through intellectual taste but because of his desire to attain moral improvement. Is not one of Mme. de Staël's finest sayings as follows: "The object of life is not happiness but perfection"?—words, however, which hardly apply to him.

This abandonment of his will to the grace of God and the orders of his superior officers was to bring him peace of mind in warfare. Before leaving for the front, during a few days' preparation in the green mountains of Tarentaise, he experienced almost a feeling of revolt or at least surprise at the thought that people were fighting and dying when the sky was so clear and the mountains so beautiful, and he felt the need of picturing to himself what the baptism of fire must be like. A strange fear seized him: the fear that he might not be sufficiently courageous, sufficiently worthy of his command, his post, the great duty entrusted to him. But once there all anxiety disappeared.

Soon there came the departure for the frontier. On the eve of the first engagements he heard his

infantrymen singing "the tender and sentimental songs of their native districts," just like the sailors of Pierre Loti in *Mon frère Yves*, huddled one against the other in the fore of their ship. They were under the influence of the same mental distress, the same nostalgia, but the storm which awaited those young soldiers far exceeded in tragedy the violence of natural elements.

The beginning was terrible, and yet, among the worst vicissitudes, the beauty of the Vosges brought him friendly consolation. Depicting the shades of evening gathering on the devastated ground and ruined villages, he employs, on seeing the shadows creep over the land, which the sun seems "to caress as a shepherd caresses a sick sheep," expressions full of a tenderness quite after the manner of Fromentin.

Even the nearness of the enemy to the outposts does not deter him from tasting the sweetness of those Virgilian nights *per amica silentia lunæ*—which are disturbed, however, by the shriek of shells and the crash when they burst.

Then, sent still farther away, lost on the intensive plains of Artois, amidst an ocean of men, he is filled with home-sickness. Where can we find more touching terms—whether in Lamartine dreaming of Meilly, or in Fromentin's *Dominique*, when he seeks comfort for his wounded heart in thoughts of his native place—than in Belmont's evocation of "the luminous twilights amongst the great oaks?" But here his accent is more poignant; there is no desire to return to his early protected years, no love sickness, but the distress of a man

abandoned far from everything he loves and in the neighbourhood of death. This distress, against which Ferdinand Belmont opposes especially his religious faith, and which he eventually conquers, continued for several weeks. It gives the letters dated the end of September and October, 1914, the pathos of interior anguish, of transitory doubt and discouragement. When he struggles against too tender recollections which assail him, he is alone, and no one save the members of his family have received his confidences. He had comrades, but no friends. He experienced the solitude of the heart. But divine help never fails the one who calls for it. We can feel that Belmont gradually cast off his depressing sadness, attained serenity and inner peace, before mounting a step still higher, the step which heroes or saints have taken, the one leading to that complete acceptance which can no longer be reached by human miseries.

“I shall not love thee less; nay, perhaps more,  
For yielding to thy nature . . .”

said Byron’s Sardanapalus. Ferdinand Belmont is not diminished in our eyes through having passed through these sloughs of sadness, and perhaps we are glad that, face to face with sacrifice, he experienced these hesitations and looked thus backwards. In this way he is nearer ordinary mortals, who feel such depression too often and turn from those who have never felt it, as one turns from a stranger.

Nevertheless, he was too accustomed to observe himself not to mistrust his emotions. Gradually he began to check himself in these evocations, or turned them

into a philosophic channel: meditations on the vanity of life and the pettiness of man, blown about like a leaf by the storm.

He felt the attraction and proclaimed the advantage of abandoning himself to destiny, or rather to Providence, but he had not yet reached the state of "wishing for nothing, desiring nothing, wisely accepting whatever happens"—the formula which gradually became the rule of his life and the observance of which was to bring him appeasement and confidence. This detachment was to take place progressively in his soul and by means of faith. He was coming nearer and nearer to a condition of acceptance, the true one, which indistinctly receives from such a heart both sorrow and joy, peace and war. That acceptance began to appear to him as the lever which would facilitate all his acts.

On All Saints' Day, instituted for mourning, he learnt of the death of his brother Jean, no further news of him had been received. His sorrow manifested itself by a eulogy of suffering, which, since it is one of the conditions of life, we ought to love. Have not all great souls glorified it? Can the happiness of one dear to us cause us in this way so much sorrow? Does it not look as though God had wished to take back his brother's pure soul "before it was soiled by the ugliness and darkness of this world?" Death, surrounding him, had begun to enter his soul. One would imagine that he was preparing to receive its visit. He was no longer not only not terrified but not even disquieted by it. Death was the vault under which he had

indeed to pass and which to him was a gateway of light. From that moment he lived intimately with it. Henceforth when he speaks of it it is in friendly terms.

When New Year's Day prompted him to look back he wished to abandon himself as best he could to the will of God, to the whirlwind which would lay him down "dead or living in some quiet spot."

After a few weeks' rest at Gérardmer, he came to the conclusion that the "school of comfort" was no good. He felt ashamed to be in a place of safety when other battalions were fighting at the Hartmannsweilerkopf. "He that escheweth not small faults," says the *Imitation*, "little by little shall slide into greater." And for that reason his desire was that his men, who were descending to a state of mediocrity, after he had seen them so great, should be kept in working order.

Then, in this correspondence, written without studied refinement, there suddenly appears a rhythmical quality reminding one of Chateaubriand—reflections concerning "the silent verities which slumber at the bottom of our souls." Elsewhere he says: "What matter the most formidable shocks of this world, since this world will pass away and passes away each day?" And we call to mind the words of Bossuet on the ephemeral nature of the world.

Ferdinand Belmont soon returned to the life of danger which he preferred to the dull and mediocre life in rest-billets, not perhaps through warlike ardour, although he proved himself on all occasions to be a remarkable leader, at once prudent and

bold, but because he could breathe more freely on the elevated plateaus of the soul, where ordinary considerations no longer ruled. Already, however, he had no further need of the proximity of danger to remain on those high and salubrious plateaus. More and more was he getting rid of all worldly ambition. He was seized with the idea that humility was the virtue *par excellence*—the one which liberates as from all artifice, all complications, all interested motives. At bottom, he envied the simple soldiers who had not to bother their heads over the question whether they were followed; he began to feel that he was not born to command, and was quite sure that at the end of the war he would be able to return to his former life without an effort. But the art of command springs from personal ascendancy, and how is it possible for this personal ascendancy not to shine from such superiority, from such a detachment from his own person? Men are often psychologists without knowing it. They could not tell you the reasons why they are attached to such-and-such a chief, yet they feel their strength mysteriously.

Indifferent to danger, attentive merely to his duty and his soul, Belmont saw the arrival of Easter. It was in a wood, in the rain, that he celebrated the feast of the Resurrection and Hope. And yet it brought him profound peace, as it did to those peasants who, in Tolstoi's *Resurrection*, came up to each other, saying: "Christ has risen," and by that news, repeated for nearly nineteen hundred years, receive physically an impression of comfort and plenitude.

The work of detachment went on in him more and more. What importance can a few years of life more or less have? Nature itself, whose charm he delighted in so much, whose seasons, colour and diversity he understood so well, became powerless to retain him. In vain did spring multiply its smile and graces around him. He knew the falsehood and vanity of them.

He now surpassed—even to the point of stoicism and disdain of life—Christian humility and acceptance, just as he had surpassed his regret of home, even to the extent of his nostalgia sadness. And similarly he found in faith the strength to resist the metaphysical temptation, as he had resisted the absorption of human tendernesses. One can follow, in Ferdinand Belmont's correspondence, the path which led him to inner perfection. It was a straight and ascending alley which the overhanging branches seemed at times to obstruct, but these had only to be turned aside to perceive once more the invariable direction. No, life was not contemptible and war was not a divine game. For man is not lost in nature, which assumes a meaning only through him, and however short may be the time at his disposal, it is sufficient for him to perceive in himself and outside himself a subordination of effects to causes, an order, a harmony, a God.

This too great philosophic detachment in the case of Ferdinand Belmont was to be purified in the flame of charity and divine love, and this was the last phase of his too brief life.

The months which followed were hard ones for his

battalion. At each attack he was astonished to find himself living in the midst of so many dead. He was astonished at it, and already he felt no further joy at the fact. He had seen death so many times, and it appeared to him to be so trifling a thing, especially when it came suddenly, as in the case of his comrade, Lieutenant Capdepont. Never does he make an allusion, in a tone of reproach, to the length or hardships of the war. He attributed to it the mysterious and fatal character accorded it by Joseph de Maistre, whose thoughts in this respect have so often been distorted.

When he heard of the death of his brother Joseph, he consoled his parents (afflicted for the second time) with supreme kindness; but one can divine that all in that family thought on similar lines and turned their sorrow to God, as a sick man his sores to the sun. Beforehand, he tried to console them for his own loss, for already he no longer counted on returning. Just as formerly he thought of the country-house where the family assembled in the holidays, so he thought of the eternal home where there are no more absent ones.

In July, 1915, came the attack on the Lingekoff. When the material work of shattering the enemy's defences was considered to be accomplished, man then entered on the scene. Scientific forces having been let loose, what do they encounter? What determines in the end advance or retreat? Man, always man. The artillery, we are assured, has destroyed everything in the opposing trenches, and yet the last rampart is a human breast. The grandeur of that poor morsel of humanity whom Ferdinand

Belmont saw lost amidst the forces of the universe, whom he pitied and loved, whilst considering the vanity of his enterprizes, he now began to recognize. He sings the praises of individual merit in words which will doubtless be often quoted, for some day the testimony of so many obscure heroes must indeed be collected.

*Et exultavit humiles.* Never will humble folk have better merited glorification than in this war, in which they have carried endurance to its furthest limits. It would seem as though the very stages of the war mark in the case of Ferdinand Belmont the stages of his inner development. After the great offering of the beginning, he was able, in the trenches, to meditate on human condition. The repeated attacks in the Vosges forced, as it were, his mind to send forth thoughts more fully charged with pity, comprehension, humility—thoughts more strained towards death and God. He ceased to deny the importance of will, and repeated almost textually Pasteur's words: “no effort is ever lost.” It is not the result that matters, but the act of the being to obtain it. Our first step towards liberty should be to free ourselves from needs, desires, regrets, doubts—all the chains we ourselves have forged, in order to find ourselves again as we ought to be, not inert, contemplative beings, after the manner of Brahmins, but living creatures, conscious of our relativity and submissive to an acting God.

The preoccupations of the soul were so powerful in the case of Ferdinand Belmont that they seem

in his correspondence to assume pre-eminence over the events of the war.

We must read, in his letters, his account of the attack of August 20, and how a leader should assume his responsibilities. He possessed the calmness and character of a leader. His ascendancy over his men came from a friendship they felt he had for them. And how could the most difficult circumstances get the better of him, he who was now always a little above human events?

On August 28, 1915, he left on furlough, and saw his parents and native district for the last time. One can imagine that he knew it; for in the letters which followed his return he shows neither emotion nor regret. He had passed beyond the zone of recollection. The beauty of September days still inspired him with magnificent descriptions, which will be quoted side by side with those of Fromentin and Loti. Who will describe better the splendour of the Vosges, the autumn, the evenings on "the hills clothed in shadow, where the red trees sing among the pines?" And he cast his thoughts back to the autumn in Dauphiny. Ah! that last autumn; one can imagine that his life was exalted in it like the colours of the woods. He breathed in the beauty of it, felt its caresses like a supreme testimony of the sweetness of the days.

Thus nature ceased to be the impassible *Eva* of Alfred de Vigny: it became the radiant hymn of permanent creation.

On October 19 he heard that he was decorated with the Legion of Honour. He was made a knight of the order on November 4, in clear, cool weather, in

front of his company assembled under the pines of the Malvenwald. Certain that the members of his family would receive a little joy from it, in the midst of their mourning, he related the ceremony in detail. For he was still able to distribute happiness from a distance, though he might no longer be able to receive any which satisfied him. His narrative is worthy of the anthologies: never has the meaning of humble devotion been expressed in language more impregnated with human sympathy and brotherly tenderness. One can foresee in it the ascent of a soul which is nearing the summit. Ferdinand Belmont had only two more months to live, and already he perceived the back of things, the eternal and unique justice.

His men—those *Chasseurs* whose portrait, at once realistic and sympathetic, he has drawn here and there in his letters, and who knew how to choose the path of divine humility—also wished, on the evening of the ceremony, to consecrate him as a knight, and came to serenade him.

Meanwhile, autumn was drawing to a close, and likewise his life. The valleys of the Vosges continued to delight him with the oncoming of winter. He loved the healthy physical exercise of excursions in his extensive sector. He accustomed himself to the company of the rude winds. The nights were fairy-like. He sings of their beauty like one of the great French poets in prose, and his descriptions of landscape ever conclude with philosophical reflections, as though the sensible forms which made his soul vibrate disappeared after having tuned it like a lyre.

What unknown presentiment, on December 3, impelled him to write a letter home which contains, almost negligently, the expression of his last wishes?

His last letter is dated December 27, and is addressed to his young brother Maxime, who was also soon to leave home. It completes his testament. He bequeathes to his brother the belief which had supported him. He seizes hold of one of Claude Bernard's formulas to introduce it in another domain. Claude Bernard said: "If I knew a truth thoroughly, I should know everything." Ferdinand Belmont declares: "He who has performed, a single minute of his life, an act of sincere faith, or offered up a fervent prayer, has conquered more truth than the most laborious genius."

Goethe, when dying, called for more light—more light. The little captain of mountain infantry, on the eve of death, called for still more faith.

On the 25th, Christmas Day, a 150 m.m. shell fell on his shelter. It was the warning. But was it necessary? On the 28th he was fatally wounded and died towards evening.

## II

Ferdinand Belmont's letters came, during seventeen months, almost daily, to revive, console and fortify a family whence four sons in succession had set out. Out of the four, three have not returned. For the third time, and this time near New Year's Day, which, formerly—before the war—was the time for joyous meetings, the family experienced a cessation of news, a period of waiting, anxiety, agony, and

certainty. In how many French homes has this not been the case?

And because it has been thus in other French homes, these letters are published. Scruples one can easily understand caused long hesitation. Read and reread, copied and recopied, Ferdinand Belmont's correspondence was known to a small circle of friends. These friends have succeeded in overcoming these very delicate doubts, the strongest of which was inspired by the modesty of the deceased, who was strongly against all seeking for fame or notoriety. They pointed out to the family that a happy action on souls might be exercised by means of this publication, and that this action, beyond a restricted circle, might reach many sorrowful hearts, many uncertain minds, and many whose courage was failing, with the result that these would be raised up, convinced, inspirited, turned into believers and heroes.

Out of the war must come, in fact, a deeper and simpler fellowship. Nothing brings people so close together as a community of sorrow. The women in mourning who meet at the cemetery see black veils—no longer dresses. They have no need to know each others' names to know each other. Their wounded souls call to each other and accept assistance.

Ferdinand Belmont was a born writer. He possessed the gift of expressing his sensibility in front of nature and of transforming his visions of the outer world into inward analyses and meditations. He had feeling for form and ideas. His unlaboured phrases are full of rhythm. I have already placed

his work side by side with the *Journal* and Correspondence of Maurice and Eugenie de Guérin; and I do not believe I am mistaken in affirming that he will be read in the same way, loved, and faithfully placed on that shelf of one's library which is reserved for books one returns to when one has received some deep wound from life and one seeks a discreet confidant who has experienced suffering.

He will especially be read by those who are anxious seekers after religious truth. "If I believed one truth thoroughly, I should believe them all," was his transposition of one of Claude Bernard's dicta. In the immense chain of interrogations which arise at every phenomenon and every movement in life, like those coveys of partridges which rise from the thickets at a horse's step, truths lead towards the Truth. In his *Nouvelle Idole*, M. de Curel compares the minds which seek for it to the stalks of water-lilies attracted by the light of the sun which reaches them through the liquid mass; they lengthen, stretch themselves out until they reach the surface of the water, where their flowers blossom. But how is it that the unique truth does not re-descend to man? How is it that God is fixed outside our conception and is absent from the inexplicable universe? How is it that, having allowed human relativity to be foreseen, if not conceived, He avoids man after awakening his desire? Can he exist, if He is not revealed? Revealed, how is it He is not the bread of life which, alone with death, is equally distributed among all? The proximity of death seems to have communicated to Ferdinand Belmont the gift of drawing closer to this present

God, this God revealed in function by whoever accomplishes human actions.

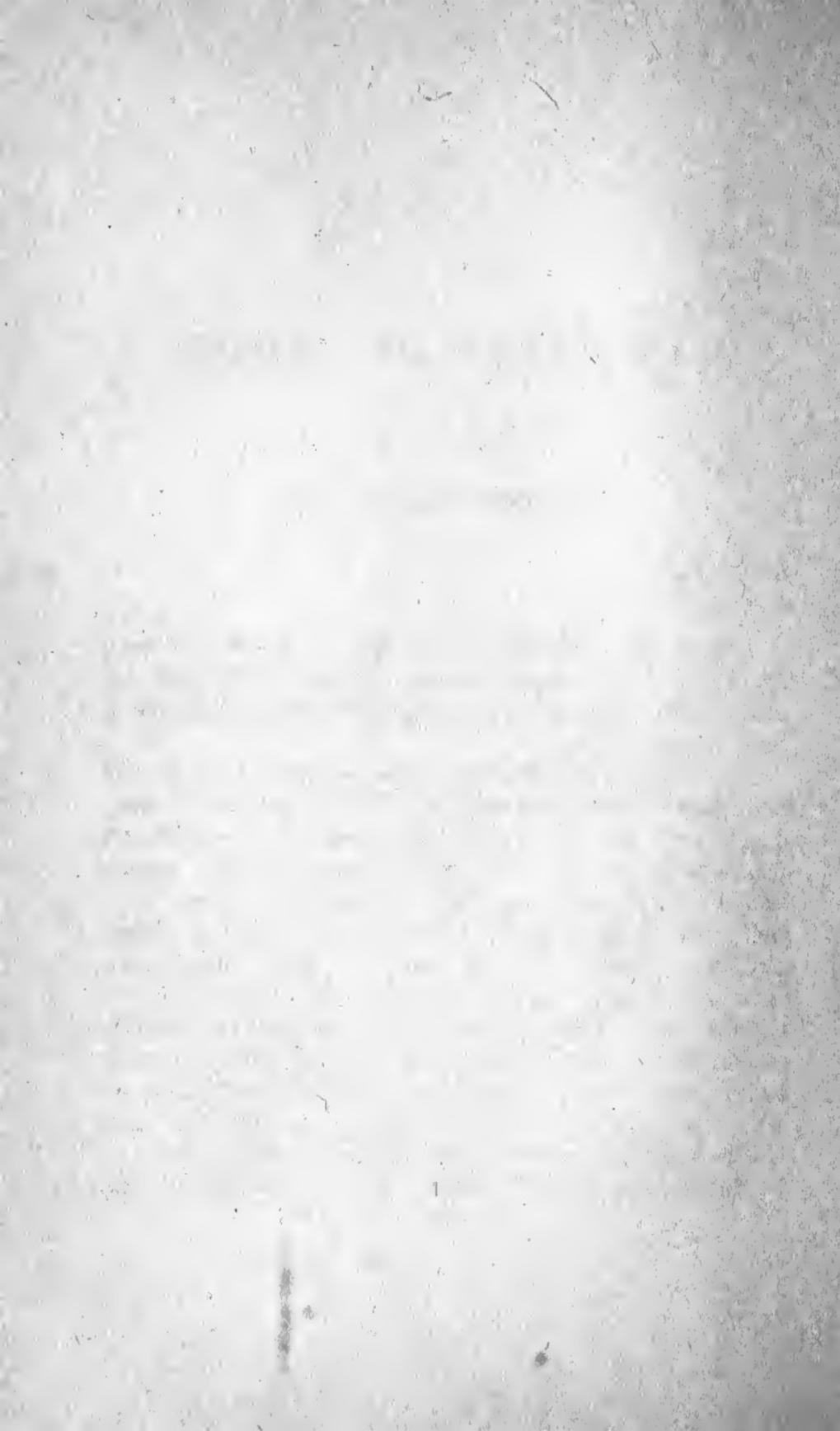
He himself had gradually loosened the bonds which held him to the earth, and when God called him, He found him free.

HENRY BORDEAUX.

*February-May, 1916.*



**BEFORE THE FIGHT**



# A CRUSADER OF FRANCE

## CHAPTER I

### BEFORE THE FIGHT

ANNECY,  
*August 4.*

AFTER our parting at Voreppe on Sunday, I left for Lyons. Perrache railway station presented an uncommon spectacle owing to the bustle, excitement and overcrowding.

To describe the journey as a pleasant trip would be exaggeration; but one must take things as they come, and put up with the means in requisition (thirty-two men in each compartment—horses lengthwise, eight), whereby everybody is crammed in pell-mell without distinction of either rank or class, and with half the men more or less intoxicated. But, after all, everything went off fairly well. I should never have believed that the general mobilization would have been accomplished with so much order and relative rapidity. When one thinks of what that represents as regards movements and traffic and the preparation of trains, which had to be formed at a day's notice, one can really only be

amazed at the manner in which the staff of the P.L.M. gets through its work. From this point of view progress has indeed been made since 1870!

Nor should I ever have believed there was such enthusiasm, such unanimous and admirable confidence in all these men, many of whom are married and fathers, and who generously go forth, without a complaint, without a murmur. And all along our way war songs are heard—the *Marseillaise* and the *Chant du Départ*; with shouting from one train to another at the crossings or in the stations. The whole way alongside the line women and children cheer and wave their handkerchiefs, while very often weeping.

Seeing such enthusiasm and generosity in those who suffer most from war, one would be very vile if one did not set out heartily when, as in my own case, everything is for the best.

At half past eight we reached Annecy, where they received me with open arms. This morning the reservists, who continue to arrive incessantly, were fitted out with clothes. Here, again, everything went off in splendid order and high spirits. Apart from that, I know nothing of the war, about what has occurred or what will happen. I believe we shall remain here for a few days before the battalion of reserve is ready to go into the field.

ANNECY,  
August 5.

To-day, at noon, we accompanied the 11th Battalion to the departure platform—an active battalion

brought to an effective of 1,000 men by means of the three classes last liberated.

You cannot conceive the ovation—thoroughly justified nevertheless—which the chasseurs received as they marched, headed by the band, to the railway station, nor the bearing of these gallant fellows half of whom were still, three or four days ago, in their fields or workshops, and who have so rapidly and so courageously equipped themselves that you could hardly distinguish the reservists from the regulars. But, above all, I do not think that I have ever seen anything so touching as that departure in perfect order, without a complaint, without useless swaggering, with the band playing the *Chant du Départ*, and the officers' wives, admirably courageous, watching the train moving off without giving way, repressing their tears so as not to affect the men uselessly; and the major leaning out of a carriage window with his hand to his *béret* to give a parting salute to Savoy. And all this done so simply, so courageously, without ostentation or bravado. I do not know what this war holds in reserve for us, but how can we fail to hope much when it opens like this?

As to ourselves, the 51st Battalion, entirely reservists, we shall, I believe, have to leave for Aisne the day after to-morrow, our mission until fresh orders being to defend our sector of the Italian frontier—that is to say, the sector from Petit Saint Bernard to Izeran.

But, in view of Italy's neutrality, it is quite probable that we shall receive the orders. . . . Moreover, we shall not care to remain in those

exquisite Alpine valleys, peacefully tasting their delights, when there is good work to be done elsewhere.

Once more, to-day, I had the impression that there was not much merit in my leaving—I who am not yet, thank God, indispensable to anybody—when I see fathers resolutely setting out leaving their wives and children in the hands of God.

If I did not leave you behind, I should set out without the slightest regret.

MACOT,  
*August 7.*

We left Annecy last night and alighted at Aime, between Moutiers and Bourg-Saint Maurice. Two companies of the 51st remained at Aime; the other two, including my own, are in quarters three kilometers higher up, at Macot, a most picturesque little Savoyard village, with the houses in rows one above the other on the hill-side, amidst clumps of walnut trees.

This calls to mind many pleasant recollections of former manœuvres; and here, in this quiet spot, it is almost difficult to believe that such important events are happening on the northern and eastern frontiers.

At any rate everything is going on all right: news of the war is favourable; but the Germans are of inconceivable savagery and brutality. They have indeed merited what is happening to them: the indignant anger and state of defence of all Europe against such infamies; and I sincerely hope that

if it is God who permits war, it will be to use it as an instrument of justice. Then . . .

*August 8.*

Here, in the semi-solitude of these mountains, where news reaches us tardily, everybody retains the same calm confidence, the same generous and resolute coolness, and all these fine fellows who were dragged yesterday from their wives' hearths and occupations are preparing in no half-hearted manner and without unprofitable excitement, to defend the honour of the country.

One must live through hours like these to be able to comprehend that "Patrie" is no vain word, to feel in its generous beauty the grandeur of the army, which rises superior to all littleness or routine, and to estimate men at their true value. It is good to be a Frenchman at this hour; it is above all good to see what devotion, energy, sacrifice and honour spring from the depths of this nation which has been reproached so gratuitously abroad with being boastful, heedless and frivolous.

This is indeed, at one and the same time, the military servitude and grandeur of which Vigny wrote, and there is no paradox in uniting these two words, apparently so contradictory.

As to what is happening on our frontiers, we receive but tardy echoes. One must be over there, on the rounded tops of the Vosges, or in the armoured turrets of fortresses, to realize to the full the bloody majesty of the drama enacted at this moment.

Are we going to join them, those who are fighting

so bravely over there, or shall we be left here in anticipation of a surprise? We are getting ready, and we wait.

However, the situation is charming: a mountainous country with the valley of the Isère, whose waters flow almost towards us. Apart from the empty houses and the military aspect of the village, everything here has its normal appearance. The weather is fine. The verdant slopes, broken up with chequered fields and sparse clumps of trees, rise harmoniously to the sombre pines, and then to the serrated rocky summits flecked with late snows. The villages, hamlets or isolated barns add to this quiet landscape the grey reflection of their slate roofs, and this peaceful existence, within a picturesque framework bathed with limpid light, gives me, after days of wild excitement in the big towns, the impression of a dream. The instruction of the reservists is carried out as methodically and quietly as that of young recruits in barracks, but with this difference—that it proceeds quietly and that we touch lightly on details. Our task is facilitated by the men's admirable willingness.

As regards officers, my company possesses but a lieutenant of reserve and myself, and to command 250 men, when you are hardly accustomed to it, is not a sinecure. Especially would it be no light responsibility to have to lead these in battle. Fortunately, the neighbouring company, the 7th, is commanded by Captain Rousse, who is an excellent officer, a veritable trainer of men, and who assists us liberally with his advice and experience.

MACOT,  
*August 10.*

To find myself here once more, in this very valley of Tarentaise, where I spent so many unforgettable hours, I seem to live over again the days of four years ago, when I came here for the first time with the happy unconcern of the soldier at manœuvres; and I doubly enjoy the easy existence, at once for the present and for all the delightful past which it awakens.

And yet, what an oppressive mystery enveils the weeks and months which await us! But we are so quickly seized by remembrance, even after long absences, that we live in our former states of mind even when everything differs so completely around us. And personally I am convinced that this will be so until the day when everything is really new; and that until our effective entry on campaign I shall live as I live to-day, without either fear or care as regards the mysterious morrow and only eager to enjoy without mental reservation these luminous days of the Alps.

During the dramatic hours through which the country is passing, how egoistic all this is! How much wiser, more virile and more generous it would be to meditate on the grandeur of the history which is folding itself, to perfect oneself in one's own task and give oneself up entirely to the past, however insignificant it may be, which each has to play in his turn! But what is one to do? To bewail the distress of the ravaged countryside or ruined homes? To waste one's strength in vain speeches concerning

events, the fragmentary accounts of which reach us? What is the good of that? Is it necessary to add oneself, with one's frivolous imagination and pusillanimous heart, to reality, the simplicity and grandeur of which are sufficient in themselves?

To live each succeeding minute without desiring anything else, either more or less—to know how to yield to everything which comes—to adapt oneself to every situation, even the most novel or unexpected—and to trouble ourselves no longer over what will perhaps take place or will not come to pass! . . . After all, everything is by the grace of God!—and never has it been more opportune to say so than now, when the events which guide us are so mighty and so formidable that they boundlessly exceed both our desires and our regrets. We are in the hands of God and feel it more than ever; we are so little capable of passing judgment on events! The greatest and most useful lesson of the history of our world is precisely the one which proves to us that we are without discernment for judging the present. The divine lessons of the past ought to enable us to regard the future without emotion. I fancy that war is one of God's great means of teaching a lesson to the nations and moulding their destinies.

We continue to lead the life of chasseurs at manœuvres. These reservists are fine fellows. Most of them leave behind them families devoid of resources, and yet they set out gallantly. I admire their honest and confident faces, their somewhat dragging step which would advance, despite the inevitable fatigue of these early 'days of marching,

and the quiet good-natured smile with which they speak of the "excursion train for Berlin." France is a mine of resource; she possesses above all marvellous moral and mental faculties, strengthened by the news of early successes—faculties which are never uncombined with this good nature, this spontaneous and somewhat jocular fancy, that picturesque embellishment of the Parisian street-boy who is never lacking in Gallie wit.

I hope, moreover, that we shall have an opportunity of seeing all these fine men at work, and it would indeed be a pity not to take part, in our turn, at the ball.

For the time being we are gradually getting into training under the direction of Captain Rousse. Every morning, about five o'clock, we set out for a march which is progressively lengthened.

MACOT,  
*August 12.*

Is it possible that troops like ours and men like ourselves are at this very moment on the battle-field, in the midst of the thunder and hail of shells and bullets? This appears so improbable, when you are living as we are amidst the quietude and repose of this Alpine valley, that we sometimes ask ourselves if the news which the too rare dispatches bring us at long intervals is not wholly invented.

That is because it is not easy to picture a battle-field, nor to say what figure we should cut on it, what emotions we should experience at the first bullets,

nor up to what extent we should be, from the first, masters of our bodies and our weakness.

And yet, already for several days past and even at this hour at which I am quietly writing in front of peaceful summits, they are fighting, and seriously; at this very minute men like myself and like us all are under fire, advance amidst the bullets, and consequently surmount that first impression of physical distress which, for my part, I fear like an act of treason and dishonour.

It is the first contact which must be the critical moment. Once that step has been taken, one ought to progress much better, be another man, an insensible thing hurled by a sort of unconscious force, impossible to define, which has suddenly arisen from the unknown depths of self, and which guides the subjugated machine until the moment it stops, triumphant or shattered.

*August 13.*

I take up again the pencil laid down yesterday. This date, August 13, reminds me that to-day I am twenty-four. When my birthday comes round once more—if it returns at all—I shall have seen a multitude of things and experienced many fresh emotions. Who knows all that may happen within the next year? Shall I still be under arms, or shall I have resumed my medical studies which were so suddenly interrupted? Shall I even still be in this world? It is a curious impression to feel oneself on the threshold of such an unknown as that which awaits us. Here indeed is what ought

to satisfy that conceited desire to live one's own life which troubles so many young men and leads them to despise their surroundings and daily routine. Here also is what ought to make those who pretend to subordinate everything to their ambition and degree reflect and humiliate themselves a little.

It is now, it will be above all in a few days, on going into fire, that we shall feel at one and the same time the importance and insignificance of human affairs, the importance of the slightest acts, since through their uniform continuity we form our character; the insignificance of all our works and desires, since it needs but a wind, rising one day, to sweep away like leaves both ourselves and our works.

We would give a good deal, at the present hour, to be able to cast a glance at the coming months; but who knows whether we should then have the courage to face them? God orders things wisely, and if we know how to recognize His will everywhere, of what importance are events? Thenceforth all are of the same value, and it would be true wisdom to pass through them with equable impassibility and unshakable serenity. This would be the sign of true faith, now so rare, the faith of the martyrs and the saints. But weakness is inseparable from man; and it is a singular consolation, that of a God, become man, praying that the cup pass from Him.

Pray for me—I who have only my simple duty to perform, like any other, and who may possess, perhaps for the first time, some merit in doing it.

It is here we realize the abominable action of

alcohol on the working-class population of towns and even those of the country. At the medical inspection it is indeed a lamentable spectacle to see these capital fellows of twenty-six or twenty-eight—miners of the Loire or day-labourers from everywhere—with ulcerated stomachs, fatty hearts, or poisoned nerves, and who are manifestly incapable, even when desires and will-powers are adequate, of performing the task now set them. What a scandalous curse that corrupting alcohol is! And what a crime these young men commit—irresponsibly, unfortunately—against their families and descendants, against their country and themselves!

At their age, between twenty-five and thirty, which ought to be the flowering time of the physical and moral being, they are already shattered, almost old men, morally and physically slaves of their vices, socially useless, if not dangerous. Among the dangers which now threaten France, this one is perhaps as redoubtable as the cannon and bayonets of the Germans.

Ah! what need France will have to return to the old beliefs upon which she is established and which support her still at the present hour!

Perhaps this war which is beginning is the sheet-anchor held out by God to this drifting country, in order to bring it back to Him, who loved and protected it so much. That would be the real triumph and victory of to-morrow: *Gesta Dei per Francos!*

Ten o'clock p.m.! Positively I had once more to interrupt this letter. They came to fetch me because of the confinement of the wife of the Macot

postman. Failing a doctor and even a midwife, in a district where children sprout as plentifully as potatoes, I went to give her the slender benefit of my knowledge. It is probable that it will not be over for some time, perhaps not until to-morrow morning. Réveillé to-morrow is at three o'clock for a march. This will be training for nights at outposts on campaign, when there will not be much sleep either.

Thus we must bring men into the world on the eve of sending them into the other !

MACOT,  
*August 14.*

I have just spent a rather lively night at the bedside of the postman's wife. Twins were at stake and their birth did not come off quite by itself. Everything, thank God, passed off all right. But I shall remember that night at Macot.

As a result, I was unable to go to bed, and was almost dog-tired on setting out at four a.m., for the manœuvre, after a night spent in a sweat, wondering how things would end. But the beautiful sun of the Alps quickly put me right. The manœuvre, in which the entire battalion took part, passed off very well, and having had an afternoon nap, I find I am sufficiently fresh and hearty this evening to admire the effects of light fading over the mountain-tops.

I occupy, in the midst of the village, a simple and natty little room, with pine-wood Venetian shutters, in the house of people who possess a good deal of that distinguished and refined manner which comes

as a surprise in a large number of Savoyard villages. Moreover, there is manifest in this interior, combined with a certain comfort, a special taste which shows a family faithful to those traditions of culture and almost aristocracy that you find in a few localities of the district. On the walls of my room figure two engravings of pictures, by Lancret, in wooden frames chosen with excellent taste. You would not find their equal in the villages of Dauphiny, nor in those of the Briançonnais.

From my window I can see the grassy brow which descends from the Rognaix, and where, every evening, glimmer forth, like night-lights, the rare, small lights of sheepfolds and farmsteads. This scrap of landscape, similar to so many others which have already delighted me elsewhere, I shall carry away with me, fixed in my memory, when we leave this serene solitude for the flaming battlefields of Alsace or Belgium.

#### *The afternoon of August 16.*

Yesterday, August 15, was a rest day. The whole village was *en fête* (only the women, naturally, and a few young people), the bells ringing a merry peal. At high mass, which was attended by many *chasseurs*, captains and leading officers, the *Curé* preached an excellent sermon, specially prepared for the occasion. Macot Church, like most of the churches in these very devout and fairly wealthy communes of Savoy, is provided with an abundance of ornaments, gilding, pictures and coloured wooden statues. These form a rather happy whole. The

church itself, despite its somewhat heavy aspect, common to the architecture of the First Empire, is pretty; it possesses, above all, a character of its own and is in no way commonplace.

The very solemn high mass, with six choir boys, if you please! and all the women wearing the gold-embroidered Tarentaise caps and, over their shoulders, shawls worked with brilliant colours, made a charming scene.

But, alas! everything is passing away. Destructive civilization, with its motor-cars and railways, is spreading everywhere, and already a few dresses which smack of the boulevard form a blemish among these ancient local costumes, so becoming on these robust and rough-hewn women, who retain the hard profile, pure and firmly designed features of their Moorish ancestors.

In the evening, at six o'clock, a special benediction of the Holy Sacrament was given in honour of the troops, and once more the *Curé* delivered a little patriotic speech. Every one came away contented, and not before having added his note to the admirable cacophony of litanies chanted in chorus by all the men.

Whilst all of us here were celebrating, *en famille*, the fête of August 15, many of our comrades or friends are receiving their baptism of fire on the frontier.

In spite of everything, we are somewhat ashamed at this present hour to live in such repose and quiet.

What we lack most are letters. Nobody is receiving any. I have had no news of you since my

departure. I shall ever remember that small Voreppe railway station—the distress of that parting amidst the bustle and the crowd—that insuperable impression of general dejection and calamity.

But do not let our minds dwell on that. We have too many reasons for hoping, and need all our courage.

Everything is going on all right: we are training, getting ready and waiting.

*August 19.*

No luck! For some days past departure had been in the air. At last, the evening before yesterday, we received an official order to leave about noon to-day; so we made ready. But yesterday evening a telegram came informing us that, because of the mobilization of Italy, the 51st, as covering troops, must remain until further orders at Aime.

So we are still here for I know not how long—fixed in this monotonous valley, useless, forgotten, left behind.

I am well aware that one must not think only of oneself, and that the higher authorities do not come to a decision at the present moment without a reason. But confess that it is humiliating for *chasseurs* to live this enervating life of independent gentlemen when there is such fine work to be done elsewhere.

Captain Rousse, who commands the Macot detachment, is indignant. A soldier to the bottom of his soul, one who has guarded with the fidelity of a vestal the sacred fire of the true warrior, he champs the bit with more impatience than ever.

One must recognize, however, that, despite his ardent desire to leave, he is the first to set an admirable example of discipline and obedience by restraining himself from protesting and by accepting, notwithstanding his vexation, the inaction to which he is condemned.

It is officers like these—enthusiasts eager to maintain throughout their career the earnestness and ardour of their Saint Cyrian days, as well as to avoid routine and tiresome uniformity—who make the French army what it is.

And that represents a certain virtue, a continuity of attention and effort, in the case of men who recommence, twenty-five or thirty years in succession, the same dull work, and who, like others, have their duties and cares as heads of families.

The country has not changed. How could it? Yet indeed a peculiar impression finally comes home to us almost everywhere—that of the abandonment in which work in the fields, suddenly interrupted through the departure of the workers, has been left, and that also of the emptiness of the villages through which we pass. It is like traversing a desert, a cursed spot desolated by some plague.

There are indeed on the threshold of the houses a few women with downcast air and reddened eyes who, thinking of their absent sons, watch us as we pass, or children who, left to themselves, are full of astonishment and cannot understand what is happening. But not a sign of a man, for the old men show themselves but little; not a sign of a labourer in the fields, where the abundant crops

remain ungathered, pillaged by the birds, beaten down by storms, and which will end by rotting on the ground whence they sprang. The harvest remains uncompleted; in the corn-fields the wheat-sheaves, set up like trophies, have begun to wither and grow mouldy.

That—these abandoned fields and villages without men—is the only thing which has modified the usual appearance of the country. But verily the impression this produces is peculiar, and we shall retain it in connection with this epoch.

To-day, which was to have been the day of departure, we are resting. The days are long when unoccupied by professional duties, for there is nothing to read and it is forbidden to move away from quarters. The *chasseurs* themselves have nothing to do. Some wander about the streets with their hands in their pockets, coming and going without knowing what to do; others, seated in the corner of barns, are writing long, careful, patient letters. Watching them from a distance, absorbed in their task, stopping after each phrase and moving the pen with a circular gesture above the paper before attacking the next, one can easily imagine both the style, at once naïve and distorted, and the object at once selfish and generous, of their correspondence.

Others again, with the slowness and ponderousness characteristic of all their movements, read with concentrated attention, spelling each word, the news of four or five days ago which is posted up on the walls of the Mairie. Then, stopping they comment and discuss—talk politics a little;

for it is a fact that the more ignorant people are regarding political matters the more they love to talk about them. Off they then move, on the clarion sounding the dinner-hour: one of the best times of the day, since it at least corresponds to a present reality. And soon you will see them seated on trunks of abandoned trees, alongside the houses, on stones, on the wheelbarrows or ploughs in the sheds, with their mess-tins on their knees and their bodies bent very low over the stew, each spoonful of which they swallow noisily, without uttering a word, and with the regularity of a pendulum until it is all eaten. When they have finished their dinner they resume their aimless deambulation in the village, or else go and stretch themselves in the hay where some of them spend hours in a sort of semi-coma, which is neither true sleep nor consciousness, and must resemble the condition of hibernating marmots.

For lack of being more useful to my country in a military way, I am called upon from time to time to act as doctor for the district. Yesterday I was called to the bedside of a poor woman who has been coughing up her lungs for the past six months, and to whom the Curé of Macot asked me to bring my poor abilities, which, under the circumstances, could be manifested only by kind words, everything else being superfluous. This apart from all men or N.C.O.'s of my company, or the neighbouring company who, gradually informed of my civil identity, come timidly, and with manifold circumlocution, to submit their cases to me—cases which they naturally consider are always very delicate

and above all very different from ordinary ones.

So that I do not despair, if we remain here some time longer, of being able to prepare, practically if not theoretically, for my duties as house-surgeon.

MACOT,

*August 20.*

At last—at last, a letter has arrived! I have been awaiting something from you for so long that I had almost lost hope of receiving anything. It is, therefore, only as a measure of prudence that correspondence has been momentarily stopped. We have no right to complain about it. Under present circumstances private interests disappear; there is only a single interest, a single cause to which all, without distinction of class, party or opinion, are rallying. France is setting an admirable example at the present time by making a clean sweep of all the differences which have so long divided her. Republicans, royalists, anarchists, socialists exist no longer; there are only Frenchmen, united in the same movement of solidarity and devotion.

I seem to have a vision of the France of tomorrow, purified by sacrifice and aggrandized by ordeal, issuing from the struggle with a halo of fresh prestige and resuming on the world's highway the place of honour she was about to abandon.

Who knows whether this formidable contest in which all the Powers stand face to face is not the redeeming devastation permitted by God in order to efface the stains which soiled the eldest daughter of the Church? Leaning over the terrifying abyss

which has just opened at our feet, we tremble when we think of the extent and range of such events, and especially at the thought of the issue of this unprecedented struggle.

But why let such cares disquiet us? Carried away by the formidable whirlwind, we are like a grain of sand that knows not whence it comes, nor whither this fatality is carrying it. Let us follow its example. Like these leaves which are seized in the vortices of the tempest, let us abandon ourselves, not to fatality, but to God, in whom we move, and who alone knows whither He is guiding us.

In the ever protracted expectation in which I live, I pray, I also, for you, whom I left in disquietude and powerlessness.

MACOT,

*August 22.*

This time it is indeed the last letter I shall write to you from Macot. We leave to-night at eleven. We know, confidentially, that we are going in an easterly direction, probably towards Besançon.

Thus, in our turn, we are going to enter into the struggle; it is now merely a question of sooner or later. We shall certainly be engaged one day or other in the line of battle; we shall see what a battle-field is like; like all the soldiers of France, we shall fight.

Every one on leaving is satisfied. During these fifteen days' respite we have got into training, and this battalion of reserves, licked into shape

through military discipline, is setting off in good form and will, I believe, cut a good figure at the intended moment.

Pray that I may, by the grace of God, do my duty honourably. What He wills will come to pass.

## THE VOSGES



## CHAPTER II

### THE VOSGES

CHAMBERY,

*August 23, six o'clock.*

WE have been *en route* since last night at eleven. Everybody sets off with a glad heart; all the men are singing; and the compartments are decked with flowers. We are to arrive this evening at . . .

*August 24, en route.*

On leaving Aime the major received notice of a new direction—that of Gray, an important regulating station where we arrived last night after having crossed the whole of Bresse (asleep within its girdle of woods), under a dazzling sun.

At Gray, a fresh surprise: we were to continue immediately in the direction of Saint-Dié, where we are expected to arrive about 5 a.m. And ever since we have been rolling along. But we are much behind our time-table, since it is ten o'clock, at the time of writing to you, and we are not yet at Épinal.

So now we are in the zone of the armies. How everything has changed since Macot! What traffic

in the railway station! What crowds of employees with armlets, troops, wounded, and specialized officers!

This first contact with the realities of war is startling! Yesterday, after Saint-Jean-de-Losne, we met an ambulance train; and this morning we encountered two others. In the short minutes during which we saw them we were able to note that the men were all brave and that their spirits were excellent. They give details regarding the circumstances under which they were wounded and express a wish we may soon avenge them. Yesterday evening we met a convoy of German prisoners.

This morning, at all the small stations through which we have passed, the sidings and platforms are occupied by wagons loaded with an odd collection of objects, such as cordage, screw-jacks, cables, siege material, waiting there to be put into use.

The roads are cut up through the trampling of the horses, and are full of ruts; both artillery and cavalry have left their traces there. The fields, covered with ripe crops, are completely deserted; only children, at great intervals, are to be seen, guarding herds of cows in bits of meadows.

All along the fields the territorials have pitched little camps, with tents or shelters of foliage, for all the world like Indian camps in the virgin forest.

*Monday evening, August 24.*

It is eight o'clock, and we are still rolling along. When I say we are rolling along, that is but a mode of speech; for in reality we are in distress, on a

siding, at I cannot say what small station between Épinal and Saint-Dié. Night has fallen—a splendid night; and in the harmonious, most verdant country the pine woods which clothe the last projection of the Vosges add a melancholy note. The sky is sown of stars and above the lines of woods which close the horizon a slender crescent moon rises. What serenity! What quietude, broken only at long intervals by the strident whistle of locomotives!

You cannot imagine the extent of the striking and inexpressible novelty of this magnificent night, the splendour of which we cannot help comparing to the horrors which are spread out barely a few leagues from here. In the flower-decked compartments the men are singing, in an undertone, the languishing songs of their native districts. It is at once touching and tragic.

*Tuesday, August 25, 10 a.m.*

We ended by reaching Saint-Dié this morning, but how late, *grand Dieu!*

Here reality is more and more striking; the town is full of soldiers, horsemen, artillery, convoys, motor-cars. Many of the troops we met have already been in action several times; the men are black, dirty, fatigued, and many of the horses limp. All this is no longer sham warfare.

A short time ago, on arriving, we fired on a German aeroplane which was flying over Saint-Dié, but which made off at once, followed by the bullets, which missed it. Another passed a moment after-

wards, but too high and too far off to be able to fire at it. It dropped bombs which fell into the fields without doing any harm.

*12.30 noon.*

We have just removed to three or four kilometres east of Saint-Dié, to protect the town against an eventual attack by German cavalry. The cannonade, which ceased about ten o'clock, was resumed a short time since, nearer, in the direction of the Vosges, the wooded barrier of which lies before us, fifteen kilometres away. Every now and then we can even see on the slopes the white balls of smoke which follow by several seconds the detonation, dull like exploding mines.

I hope it is *our* artillery which is firing. We ourselves are in reserve behind the first hills which rise to the east of Saint-Dié. The two companies are in the first line of a healthy ridge at an altitude of 2,500 to 3,200 feet. The two other companies, including my own, are massed in the second line on sloping meadows; and here we wait. But, judging by the cannonade, which is becoming more distinct and nearer, like the dull rumbling of a storm, and by the patrols of horsemen or stray, bustling and exhausted foot-soldiers, who come down to Saint-Dié, to re-victual, the enemy must be progressing towards us and the day will probably not go by without our having to fight.

*4 p.m.*

We are still awaiting the attack. Will it be made

this evening or to-morrow? Small bodies of troops are passing along the road in disorder, falling back on Saint-Dié. There are all sorts: foot-soldiers, hussars, and sappers, escorted by peasants and bonnetless women, who carry baskets and cloaks. All these are in flight. The men who pass—dirty and worn out—say that the Germans are at Provenchères, ten kilometres in front of us. It is, therefore, probable we shall spend the night here.

The men of the 22nd who are falling back on Saint-Dié were, a week ago, at Saint-Marie-aux-Mines, in the midst of Alsace. From line to line they are retreating, harassed by the German artillery.

In our present position it is useless to try to know or understand anything. We are drowned in such a mass that we cannot give an account of what is happening in the whole. Thus, to-day, whilst we are falling back where we are, we gained, it appears, a splendid victory at Raon-l'Etape. They must be in pursuit of the Germans over there, for the artillery has begun to roar again, but further off and duller.

### 5.30.

The marching past of the retreating 22nd continues. All the men are hideous, hirsute, and visibly worn out. They have been fighting for three weeks, and have more often slept in the open air than on hay. However, notwithstanding their fatigue, they are cheerful and courageous. Many of them brandish trophies triumphantly—one a German soldier's

hairy knapsack, another a loader, a third a spiked helmet or a foraging-cap.

So now we are on the eve of our first battle. It is difficult to believe that up to the last moment we have had no presentiment. This evening, in the hazy twilight of the Vosges, whence come the echoes of the distant cannonade, there is not a trace of anguish. Faces are serious but resolute; words springing to the lips are perhaps somewhat anxious, but full of animation and sometimes chaff. Gallic blood will come out.

Men sent to Grattin, a small village where we shall take up our quarters to-night, are going to prepare dinner. This evening we are on campaign and I have told my men that we shall mess together.

To know that to-night you and the family are praying for me gives me great confidence.

*Friday, August 28.*

This time we have received our baptism of fire—and a serious one, I assure you.

I believe it was the evening before last I left you. Having passed the day at the hamlet of Dijon, we went down again to Grattin, to sleep. That evening the enemy was not far off; for patrols sent into the woods before Dijon saw German foot-soldiers several times. Captain Rousse's cyclist killed a Uhlan, and brought back his small flag. A patrol, sent out by the 51st, returned with a wounded corporal.

In the evening, at nightfall, the cannonade, which had rumbled all day, suddenly and violently de-

scended on the positions occupied by the main part of the battalion behind Dijon, and for a few moments the uproar was infernal.

A little later infantry fire, very near, crackled forth in the woods on our left. Therefore everything authorized us to anticipate that the next day would not be without novelty.

At night, when bringing back my section to Grattin, we were several times fired at in the darkness, fortunately without being hit. I found out afterwards that a section of my company had taken us for Germans. A mere mistake!

The next day, at dawn, we took up the same positions as the day before and the evening before that. We were immediately joined by our Alpine battery and strengthened by a company of 300 men from the dépôt at Annecy.

Shortly after dawn, about five o'clock, the cannonade recommenced and made a certain impression. Having stood a copious downpour of shrapnel without damage, we set about taking steps against the enemy, who were certainly not far off. Captain Rousse's company had continued to occupy at Dijon his defensive positions and trenches, prepared two days before. As he had sent the information, collected by his patrols, that an attack on the left was probable at any moment, Captain Deschamps, in command of the 51st, dispatched me immediately with my section to strengthen it, as on the day before. But this time it was more serious.

About 6.30 Captain Rousse received an order to take the offensive—an order he had awaited in vain the day before, when conditions were more advan-

tageous. The road from Dijon immediately enters a pine wood the outskirts of which . . .

*Saturday, August 29.*

I should like to resume my letter at the point I left off, but I am worn out and famished. We have had no distribution during the four days we have been in action. The battalion is broken up, and has partly disappeared; all the men are at the end of their strength, and have hardly been able either to sleep, or to rest, or to eat for the last three days. And in addition to that we are beaten: Saint-Dié is occupied by the Germans. A counter-attack, attempted by us yesterday, though the men were regularly knocked up, partly succeeded, but came to nothing this morning. So, dog-tired, we are retreating, followed by infernal artillery fire, which has claimed not a few victims since yesterday.

I shall wait for another day, when body and mind are in a better state, before resuming the narrative of our first fight, the day before yesterday, when Captain Rousse, under my very eyes, met a uselessly heroic death. Many others also were killed or wounded on that day.

But I will tell you all about that some other day (if that day is to come), when we are no longer under this hellish shell-fire and have once a little quiet and silence. To-day I am hardly capable of telling you anything but this: I should like bread, rest, sleep.

These few lines are written in one of those splen-

did forests of the Vosges where I halt in order to protect the retreat of the batteries of 75's.

*Sunday, August 30.*

Things are going a little better this morning. The weather is ideal, the country delightful, and it is wretched to see it cut up in this manner by war. But above all, I obtained bread yesterday evening, thanks to the charity of a foot-soldier from whom I begged. Ah! you are no longer proud when you have had nothing to eat for two days.

So things are going better. We are still in action. The 51st, or at least what remains of it, has the dangerous mission of resisting at all costs, in order to enable the 14th Army Corps to retreat by the Bruyères road. Since this morning we have been deployed as sharpshooters behind the lines of bushes and the outskirts of the pines which clothe the slopes of this valley from La Bolle to Rougiville, that has been swept for three days past by a continuous rain of shells. At the hour at which I write to you (2 p.m.) the shells pass every two or three minutes with a shrill whistle, terminated by a thunder-clap. But you end by getting used to this uproar when you have been walking about in it for close upon five days, and, whilst keeping an eye on the points of the German positions at which our artillery is aiming, I enjoy this magnificent day.

How delightful the forests of the Vosges must be when you come to them as a peaceful visitor!

I was telling you, then, that, last Thursday, our first fight took place in the morning. Two sections of Captain Rousse's company entered the pine

wood, one on each side of the road, immediately supported by two other sections including my own. Hardly had the first scouts entered the forest when a furious rifle-firing began, accompanied by cries and savage calls. The captain, who was preceding me, ordered me to advance my section quickly, in the direction which he indicated. But the firing redoubled, came from all sides at the same time, and men began to fall heavily, noiselessly, on to mossy ground. Then the captain, pale and very agitated, stood up in the wood and shouted at the top of his voice: "Help! Help! With fixed bayonets!" And immediately, at his first movement to dash forward, he fell backwards.

At that moment I was trying to see the Germans, who were shooting us almost point-blank, and who were invisible, thanks to their greyish uniforms mingling with the wild-raspberry bushes and ferns.

Meanwhile men were falling. Seizing the rifle of one who had fallen by my side, I fired a few shots, whilst sheltering myself as well as possible behind a pine tree or a clod. But very quickly, on looking around me, I saw that there was hardly any one else standing . . .

Then, rather than get killed all by myself, which would doubtless have been more heroic, I fled towards the houses of Dijon, jumped over the barricades and, amidst a continuous whizz of bullets, took refuge in a house.

On looking back once or twice, I recollect having seen Germans quite near, firing in our direction.

Once I thought of barricading myself in a house and firing from the windows when the Germans

came. But the village was already completely deserted; one or two *chasseurs*, who had entered the house with me, said: "A shell has just fallen on the roof," and . . .

What was one to do alone? In my turn I fled, as best I could, hearing, for four or five hundred metres, the bullets hissing like serpents everywhere, whilst tracing lines in the grass.

How did I reach a wooded hillock where our Alpine battery and machine-gun were? How is it that I was not at least wounded on that day? It is a miracle, for I found out afterwards that four bullets had touched me. One merely grazed my Tyrolean knapsack, another traversed my aluminium water-bottle, a third went right through my knapsack and everything it contained, whilst a fourth even struck the butt of the rifle I had in my hand. I must indeed thank God for having come out of it safe and sound.

For a moment we took up our position again around the Alpine battery. But soon the shells dislodged us from it. A gun had to be abandoned . . .

For our beginning, that was terrible and sad. Several officers—five at least—were left there that morning.

Poor Captain Rousse! I shall ever see him, with his head thrown back and his knees bent, being borne away amidst the bullets by two of his men, who supported him under the arms. Before dying he said to them: "Thank my company for me," and afterwards: "Take orders from Captain Deschamps." He also told his corporal, who was carrying him away, to take his sabre and give it to his son. And

he died like a hero—sacrificed, seeing himself sacrificed, flinging himself with despair but bravely into the arms of death.

That surprise among the pines, those rifle-shots, those cries, those shrieks (amidst which I several times clearly distinguished commands in German), that death of the captain—all that I shall never be able to forget.

At Saint-Dié all the houses were closed and the streets deserted. We were ordered to erect barricades and take up positions to defend the streets of the town; and there we waited to resist in the streets, as on the day of Bazeilles.

The weather was terrible. Everybody was dog-tired, silent, driven into corners against the walls, whilst the shells fell on the town.

We waited in that way until noon. Then came an order to evacuate the town and fall back on La Bolle. So we formed ourselves into column again and left the town amidst the rain and the wind. But hardly had we got out when once more we came under the fire of the German artillery. Reinforcements proceeding towards Saint-Dié told us we must return there. After that the battalion broke up into several parts. One, under Captain Deschamps, made a counter-attack from Saint-Dié, whence they were driven with fresh losses; another, to which I was attached, wandered about in disorder until evening, pursued by the big German howitzers.

Since then—that is to say for the past three days—we have been manœuvring in this little valley which stretches from Saint-Dié to Rougiville, losing

ground one day, regaining a little the next, but only to lose it once more, leaving a few men behind daily, and totally lacking in victuals. Consequently the men are at the end of their resources. From the very first day they have seen many of their comrades fall, they are not eating, sleep badly, and . . . But daily we must set out again on campaign, stand the grape-shot and bullets, lose ourselves, disperse, and endeavor to get together again in the evening to find rest-billets.

Only fragments of the 51st Battalion remain. I do not know how many men have been killed or wounded. There are no more captains left; half of the sub-lieutenants are either killed or wounded; and there are stragglers who have not yet found us. In short, this morning, there assembled, to strengthen the barrage of the valley in which we are collaborating, only 180 men and three sub-lieutenants, . . .

To-day, I do not know how the day is going to end. Our mission to hold the valley, in advance of the ways of retreat, at all cost, has up to now been relatively easy to fill. The German patrols have been driven back by our artillery and infantry fire. And at the present time, established on our positions, we are assisting at an artillery duel which will perhaps last until night, and the only object of which appears to be to hold in respect the troops on either side.

Over this pretty valley, encompassed by pine-clad slopes, and in this beautiful cool weather of the end of summer, the shells pass, replying to each other from one end of the valley to the other, and spreading desolation wherever they strike. Columns of

smoke—sometimes even real fires—arise where the grape-shot falls. A sawmill has just blazed up with immense tongues of flame before our eyes.

And to-day is Sunday—the day for the opening of the shooting season at Llonnes, where the country must be so beautiful, so quiet, so reposeful.

The day before yesterday, on overtaking a battalion of the 22nd Infantry, I came across Jean, who called out to me. As a soldier he was unrecognizable. We were able to see each other for only two minutes at the roadside. He had just arrived by stages, and did not know what they intended to do with him.

He also told me that he had no news of you since his departure. Nor I either.

When and where shall I now receive your letters, granting that I ever get them? And do you receive mine, those I write to you, like this one, on my knee, in the open air, whenever I have a moment to spare? The last ones I entrusted to folk who were fleeing to Saint-Dié. Was the post office able to get them away before the arrival of the Germans? And this one (already resumed twice), how shall I get it to you amidst our confusion, and far as we are from convoys and any resource?

Moreover, during the past four or five days I have never known where I should sleep at night, nor even if I should still be uninjured.

Ah! war! war! . . .

It will soon be 4 p.m. The artillery stopped a short time since, on their side and on ours; a few rifle-shots are indeed fired from time to time, but perhaps the fight will remain where it is for

to-day, and the accomplishment of our mission will have been easy. Unless the Germans are preparing something during this insidious silence.

They are very good at that, as well as at shelling us at nightfall. They then advance as close as possible to our lines and sweep everything before them at random. If, fortunately, that does not often do much damage, it is always impressive, disquieting, and forces the troops to retreat still farther before taking up their quarters.

Pooh! The weather is fine. The day will perhaps end quite calmly. Yesterday evening the sky, towards Saint-Dié, was all ablaze.

### *Monday evening.*

We have spent a cruel night at the outposts, on the wet grass, alongside a road strewn with corpses, and near the smoking embers of a burnt-out house.

To-day we have maintained the same positions by organizing them definitely by means of trenches. The men are regularly knocked up.

We occupy the hedge of a pretty pleasure property, elegant and luxurious, which was bombarded yesterday and completely destroyed—shattered from cellar to roof. It is lamentable.

This evening there is a very pure sky, across which pass from time to time German aeroplanes on reconnaissance. It is a clear evening, with the shadows of the pines lengthened by the setting sun, and the whole valley seems to be reflected in the pale twilight sky.

It is sad to the point of tears to feel oneself alone

at such a job, and amidst such a scene, which by contrast makes the dismal desolation of the district more striking—a district ravaged by shells, and where abandoned bodies form, here and there, black stains on the meadows. What a hideous contrast!

A moment ago, one of my comrades, a sub-lieutenant, was wounded by a shell-splinter. Ah! the 51st Battalion of *chasseurs* is frittering away!

We have also taken in a wounded German, who came to implore our assistance.

Farewell! War is indeed horrible, and there are times, like this evening, when, in spite of oneself, one is overcome by hideous depression.

And yet the weather is so beautiful, the country so pleasant!

*Wednesday, September 2.*

Things are going better—much better. I speak solely of what concerns me, since I know nothing or almost nothing, of the war, nor even about the remainder of the world.

But, personally, I have obtained since yesterday a little comfort, in which I was in great need from every point of view.

After having remained three days and two nights at the outposts, in the midst of desolation, rubbish and dead bodies, we were at last relieved yesterday morning, in order to rejoin our battalion (or at least what remains of it), and we have had an afternoon's rest, in addition to receiving bread and meat.

We found ourselves again with the 11th Battalion, since we mustered together; and at the orders of

the major-general the two battalions have been united. The 51st no longer exists; there is only the 11th, with seven companies, the whole being placed under the command of Major Augerd.

As far as I am concerned, I am delighted with this arrangement. We enter into a well-constituted unity, well in hand—one in which the moral is better and the life more stirring.

I experienced yesterday an impression of profound bliss at being able to rest a little in the sun, to eat, and to sleep at night on a mattress. What comfort!

To-day our new battalion, the 11th, is held in reserve for the division, and up to the present we are at rest, assembled against banks or in the sinuosities of the ground, ready to be sent to the point where they need us.

*Thursday, September 3.*

Come, I have again seen the sun rise this morning. It was devilishly cold when it began to appear, all red, on the misty horizon; now it is already high and dazzling. After a night in the open air, this sun-bath is a beneficent sensation.

Yesterday Major Augerd led four companies in an attack on the Kemberg, a terrible ridge, bristling with pines, on to which the Germans are holding, with machine-guns in trenches, and whence they dominate the whole situation to the west of Saint-Dié. When our troops reached the summit, which crowns this ridge, they encountered a short but very steep slope, and it was at that very

moment that the rifles and invisible machine-guns opened fire on them. Twenty men were killed or wounded; a captain was killed, another wounded. Face to face with this hurricane of bullets, the major considered it wise to retreat, in order to avoid the massacre of the whole of his battalion; and from the position we occupied below we saw the companies come back, one by one, and reunite at the bottom of the outskirts of the woods.

So the two last captains of the 11th have fallen! It is, however, a fact common to all corps that the losses in officers are proportionately much higher than those in the rank and file. The best German marksmen, it is said, have received orders to aim at any one with stripes. Anyway, the staff of officers for this big battalion of 1,700 men is now singularly depleted. The result is that the survivors will have to assume important commands; and I was informed yesterday evening that I shall probably have to take command of the 5th Company. *Mon Dieu!* how shall I manage with the little experience I possess? What a responsibility to lead 250 men on campaign! I pray God to enlighten me concerning duties for which I am insufficiently prepared.

To-day we are organized for resistance at the hamlet of Claingoutte, to the south-east of Saint-Dié, where we were sent yesterday evening with two companies of the 11th to relieve the outposts held by the 30th of the line. We passed the night there—a splendid night illuminated by the moon and stars—rolled in our cloaks, on which the dew-drops collected. It was cold. After the final gun-shots

of straggling patrols, quietness came—a delusive lull in these parts where the storm of shells rages from morn to night.

At break of day we roused ourselves, hustled about to restore the circulation of our blood, and rolled up our cloaks. Some of the men went off to the shelter of the houses to warm the coffee—the good old “juice” of the trooper; and since dawn we are burrowed in our holes, motionless, crouching in the red earth, among the clover and potatoes. We shall remain here as long as we are left, keeping watch over the ground and, from time to time, sending small patrols into the wood on our left to guard against a surprise. . . .

For the past hour a huge German dirigible, similar in its yellow rotundity to an enormous larva, has been swaying above the valley of Sainte-Marguerite.

Since this morning everything has been confined to an artillery duel. The quantity of artillery ammunition consumed by the Germans is incredible. Whatever may have been said, their famous heavy artillery is not negligible—one must recognize that after having seen a few of these huge craters it sinks in the fields, with a stupendous eruption of earth and iron, or else the breaches it makes in brick walls or roof. But, above all, they can fire from a great distance (8 to 9 kilometres) with these big guns, which is at once their strength and weakness; for if they are able to bombard as from far off they are aiming somewhat in the dark, so much so that in the end they do not do great harm, considering the inordinate quantity of projectiles they fire. The tiny bullets which strike you slyly,

without you hearing them coming, are more to be feared.

*Sunday, September 6.*

Sunday! You would not have the least idea of it here, where everything is on fire or in rack and ruin, and where the only bell is the rumbling bass of cannonades. September 6!—That represents more than a month of war. How is it that I am still here uninjured—the same as I was on the day I left you at Voreppe railway station?

One marvels, on finding oneself still alive, to perceive that one has lived up to the present time.

I believe that I have not written to you since Thursday, but there has been nothing very particular to report. From Claingoutte we moved to Gironnaire, near Saint-Léonard; then, on Friday night, we rejoined our battalion at Taintrux.

A little incident occurred at Gironnaire. We were attacked and charged—by a cow, a wild young heifer which rushed at us from behind the end of a hedge. Ahead of the others, I was the first to be bowled over, and the animal charged me twice, with lowered head, and would certainly have injured me if it had not, fortunately, been devoid of horns, owing to its youth. I got off with a fright and an insignificant bruise.

Further on it charged Lieutenant Beynet, who was in command of the remainder of the company, but he found protection behind a tree and killed it with two rifle-shots. There and then it was cut up and distributed to sections of the company, the remains

and the skin being given to the people of the district, who can find nothing to eat in this time of war. And that is how we came, on Friday evening, and within a protecting barn, to enjoy a delicious fillet. Small incidents of the great war!

This morning, the German trenches in front of us being evacuated, as the result of a hot peppering with projectiles, we have slightly advanced in the direction of Rougiville; and it is from one of these very trenches, still occupied yesterday by the enemy, that I write to you, until we continue the movement forward, since we have received orders to take the offensive.

Another lieutenant of the battalion was killed yesterday. If this continues, there will soon be no more officers to command these 1,600 to 1,700 men.

*Sunday evening, 5.30.*

Nothing fresh to-day. Like every evening at this time, the German heavies are bombarding us from a great distance. An hour of patience, the shades of night over us, and the cannonade will have ceased. We shall then be able to leave our holes. But it is probable, considering the situation, that we shall receive orders to remain at our positions, and this will be one more night spent in the open air.

Behold the evening cometh, gradually casting its shadow over the countryside, which the sun seems to caress as a shepherd caresses a sick sheep. In these last feeble rays, which cause the shadows on the sloping sides of the mountains to incline, there is,

as it were, an expression of regret, a word of consolation, if not of hope.

How the war has devastated everything before us! A house—after many others—has finished burning at our feet. As far as the eye can reach there are nothing but ruins, shattered roofs, abandoned houses. Through my glasses I can distinguish in the distance a column of German infantry defiling along a narrow road. To think that those men marching over there, whom I can see in movement, advancing, and who are men like all of us, like myself, are enemies, and that, mutually watching each other from afar, we are anxious to kill each other some day or other—to-morrow, this evening, no matter when.

These appalling thoughts come to one sometimes when one reflects, especially during these clear evening hours when Nature, with her multitudinous voices, sings the hymn of peace, meditation, repose. No! No! We must thrust these egoistic temptations from us. We are at war and must wage war. It is a great and serious duty to be accepted and fulfilled. But pray for me; I have such need, such great need of your prayers. When shall I see you again? If you only knew how every moment I think of you. May God protect you all!

Still no news from my brother Jean. He must be now with the troops of the 22nd of the line, which is to lead the attack with us.

*Monday (morning), September 7.*

Still in our trenches on the outskirts of the wood. Stretched on a bed of pine branches made by one

of my men, wrapped in my cloak and covered by a German great-coat, picked up in the wood, I have slept several hours, opening my eyes from time to time to see the light of the moon filtering through the trees, or to hear a distant rumbling of artillery or ammunition wagons.

As soon as day broke a German 77 battery began to pepper copiously the wood where we are, and kept it up conscientiously for six or seven hours, but with little intervals, advantage of which was taken by the men who threaded their way through the wood, to attend to revictualling. For it is of the utmost importance to eat on campaign. They have just brought in my lunch: a beefsteak, *pommes sautées*, carrot soup, and coffee. This is an important moment of the day, although one continually expects to see a shell fall into one's plate of potatoes.

You must go at full speed in warfare, and never before have I understood so well the literal truth of the expression "*Avoir du cœur au ventre.*" For the stomach plays a great part. The rest is somewhat, if not completely, sacrificed; and in these days people who have at their disposal a dressing-room, with perfumed soaps, eau-de-Cologne, nay even a bath-room, appear to me to be effeminate decadents. Still, if these things were within my reach! . . .

*Wednesday, September 9.*

At about two o'clock this morning, a German patrol having approached our lines, gun-shots were fired, and, as always happens in the dark, all the men began firing into the obscurity, without knowing either at

whom they were shooting or why. There was furious and impressive firing for a quarter of an hour. Then the rifle-shots became fewer and fewer, and silence reigned once more.

The fox-like existence we are leading is in the main a very vegetative life. But when the stomach does not clamour, the rest is all right, provided however that you do not allow yourself to reflect too much. The lieutenants and the two N.C.O.'s with whom we "break bread" are fine chaps who do not let themselves be demoralized by a cannon-ball; and if you were present at one of our meals, nibbled on the mossy ground or in the hollow of a trench, you would have a difficulty in believing that we are a few hundred yards from the Germans, who watch us from the opposite edge of the wood, and that one of these shells which mow down the pines more or less everywhere may at any minute claim one of us.

The other evening, at nightfall, whilst we were thus unceremoniously dining, all four conversing in an undertone, a sentry came to ask the lieutenant who commands us for the pass-word for the night. The lieutenant, after momentarily hesitating, replied: "*Ma foi*, the general hasn't told me. Well, let it be m . . . !" And he uttered Cambronne's heroic reply. Ah! old France! The stupid Germans will not so quickly destroy the heritage of our ancestors the Gauls; and I am quite certain that they over there, opposite us, do not know the art of replying, *in articulo mortis*, by means of such witticisms.

*Thursday, September 10.*

Yesterday evening the German cannonade clearly had as its objective the little village of Rougiville, at the base of the slopes we occupy, for they did not rest until they had set fire to the few houses still standing, and one or two of which were inhabited. The ruddy glare of the fire in the darkness of the night and amidst the Gothic cannonading of the pines was a tragic sight.

*Friday, September 11.*

Oh, what a surprise! The battery which has been incessantly bombarding us for several days past became silent this morning, and we have reason to believe that it made off during the night. It looks as though the Germans had cleared out in front of us. A patrol, whom I just sent almost to the trenches they occupied, has returned without having received a single shot, and brings back a number of articles taken from German bodies: knapsacks, cartridges, rifles, provisions, papers, etc. Positively, we have done them more damage than we thought. Come now, things are going well.

Moreover, we are informed by the staff of the division that the French armies have gained *a great victory north of Paris*. Will this be the decisive victory? Let us hope so. The men immediately regained courage, notwithstanding their ten consecutive nights at the outposts, on all of them bringing in trophies.

SAINT-DIÉ,

*Tuesday, September 15.*

A few quickly written lines to you this morning, before setting off, to let you know I am still alive.

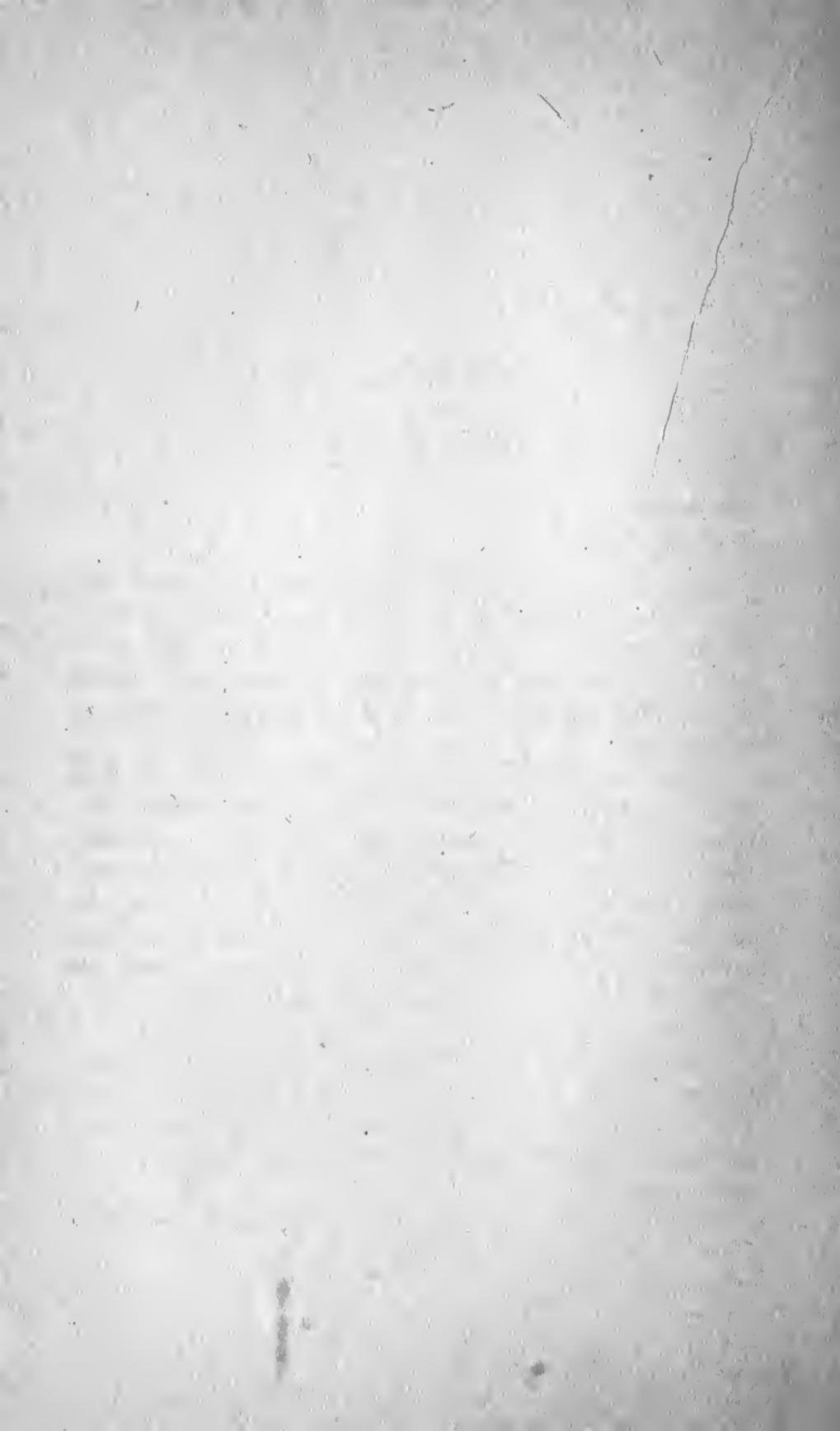
The Germans are retreating before us, and it is already three days since our troops reoccupied Saint-Dié; but a devastated Saint-Dié, still shuddering at the savagery of the Boches, and where the women and children flocked to meet us, to shake our hands and throw us flowers.

Since, we have lived three laborious days, with nights in the open, in the rain and a bitterly cold north wind.

Yesterday, September 14. I once more looked death in the face. My Tyrolese knapsack received the bullet. It was the day on which the competition for the post of house-surgeon was to have begun! . . .

To-day we leave by road for Ramblervillers, where we entrain for another destination.

# THE SOMME



## CHAPTER III

### THE SOMME

MAGNIÈRES,  
*September 16.*

THIS time we are having an absolutely quiet day, and it is so long since we had the impression of a similar *farniente* that it seems quite funny to us to hear no longer the music of the guns and rifle-firing and to indulge in the careless indifference of life in rest-billets.

Since that short sojourn among the pines of the Bois de Trois-Jambes, where we lived happy days, seasoned by several thousands of shells, many things have happened. We returned to Saint-Dié, and then set off in pursuit of the Boches, in the direction of the frontier. But they were entrenched between Saint-Dié and the Col de Saales, and we kept in contact with them for two days, in terrible weather.

Ah! indeed, I shall remember the night of September 12–13, when an icy rain fell and a violent north wind blew upon us as we stood, shivering and with chattering teeth, in the trenches, full of water and mud.

On the 14th we sustained an attack beyond our

strength, and the battalion, which alone remained in line, lost, that day, quite a number of men. Once more I was lucky, my knapsack again being pierced by a bullet. We remained in a difficult position until 2 p.m. At that hour the major, to prevent his battalion being cut into little bits, ordered the retreat.

That day, September 14, with its abominable weather, will remain one of the recollections of the campaign. Not since the Dijon fight have I seen death so near.

At night we returned to Saint-Dié, where we enjoyed the charm of rest-billets. The next day came a long march of 29 kilometres to Rambervillers, via devastated roads and villages completely in ruins—burnt, destroyed, and where, sometimes, only one or two roofs remained.

This district has suffered terribly from the war!

In the fields, little red hillocks mark the graves (surmounted by rude wooden crosses) which have been dug almost everywhere. Equipage and broken weapons lie here and there at the sides of the roads and in the ditches.

Everywhere are evacuated trenches, fortifications, shelters, barbed-wire entanglements, barricades, abatis, shell-craters—all the suggestive traces of the struggle which took place these last few days.

A large number of dead horses, left in the fields, poison the air.

This morning we came here, 12 kilometres from Rambervillers, and we are resting, enjoying this unwonted tranquillity unreservedly.

*September 20.*

We arrived yesterday at Clermont. We came here, to Fornival-l'Argillière, across a slightly undulating plateau, wholly composed both of extensive and small cultivated spaces, with little clumps of oaks or beeches at long intervals, and even real woods, which form dark barriers at the far ends of the tilled expanses. How this district differs from those we have just left! And still more from our parts—the real, already distant home-land of which I think daily, with the fear of thinking about it too much.

Quartered in a huge isolated farm, we can barely hear the boom of the guns in the distance. What they intend us to do now I do not know. We are at a fresh seat of operations—the most serious of all. We live from day to day. His will be done!

*September 22.*

It is beginning to get terribly cold, and it is not without dread that I see the inclement days of autumn approach. Rain, wind and cold are not the least of our enemies.

I learnt yesterday that since September 2 I have been a lieutenant.

*September 25.*

What changes in our existence since the manœuvres around Saint-Dié! We are far from the Vosges and their pines in these northern lands, so new to us,

so different from those we know. But it is not without charm, this vast country of fertile plains, gently undulating and intersected by woods, broad roads bordered with trees, or sluggish rivers, which wind through humid dales, adorned with magnificent trees. A rich and hospitable country, where we have received the best of welcomes. The people are intelligent, active, wide-awake, trained up to the laborious life of large agricultural undertakings—gigantic farms scattered in the midst of cultivated land, stretching out of sight.

Or else there are populous, dense villages, with neat and elegant houses, almost always of a single storey, and with brick walls brightened up with white stones. Their interiors are well kept, clean, well-to-do, and often ornamented with very pretty old things: ancient china hung on the walls, pewter plate on the chimney-pieces, huge oak cupboards with thick sides, or massive clocks with chimes.

To-day we are in contact with the enemy. No longer are we engaged in petty mountain warfare, such as we had in the Vosges, but in big engagements of several days, on huge fronts and extensive spaces, where you can see a great distance, and where the artillery has an immense range, which it sweeps in the most thorough manner. This has somewhat bewildered our *chasseurs*, who were hardly accustomed to manœuvres at altitudes between 150 and 320 feet above sea-level.

Once more our battalion has been re-organized. It is now composed of eight companies. I command the 8th, and it is not a sinecure. Major Augerd has been promoted lieutenant-colonel. We are very

sorry to have lost him, although Captain Foret, of the 140th, who replaces him, also appears to be very nice.

There are, however, hours when you give yourself up to thoughts of home and of those you love;—those from whom you are separated, without news, perhaps indeed for a long time.—I think of the pleasant evenings within the family circle, of the familiar talk aimlessly prolonged at the fire-side in the evening; or else, on these damp or misty mornings of September, when the sun rises wholly red behind the lines of trees, I think of the beautiful autumn days in the fields of Lonnes, of the luminous twilights in the great oaks at the hour when, calling to the dogs, you turn your steps towards the warm intimacy of the old house.—I think of you, of ourselves, of all that, of those thousand recollections which crowd upon me as soon as the door is opened to them; and then I realize that I am here, lost in this ocean of men, delivered over to the mystery of my destiny. I feel the cold which makes my limbs tremble, the vacuity which invades me, and fear to be thrown into confusion and discouragement.

At that moment I think of you, of Emile; I feel my rosary, always with me, in my pocket; sometimes, in these moments, I tell a few *Ave Maria*, and confidence returns; I hope for better days, for good follow the bad. I endeavour also to live each minute without thinking of more than that; to live from day to day. His will be done!

*September 26.*

All goes well. The battle continues—the great battle. Perhaps the great victory.

There has been fierce fighting to-day; and it will continue to-morrow. But courage! Confidence! The Germans suffer and lose more men than we do. This is the time to put one's whole heart into the work. *Vive la France!*

*September 27.*

Here, our artillery, which was somewhat muzzled and placed at a disadvantage in the mountainous region of the Vosges, recovers its full value, and amidst these vast expanses, with low horizons, it shoots with certainty and efficiency.—What a splendid instrument our glorious 75 gun is! And how we little *chasseurs* and foot-soldiers love to hear behind us its fine big voice, encouraging us and urging us on to the attack! One feels full of confidence on hearing its sonorous rumbling; and on distinguishing, in the formidable symphony of the battlefield, the clear tone of its vibrating notes, one has the same pleasure as the sportsman who recognizes the pure-bred dog by his baying when on the track. How inelegant and “mongrel” the wretched little 77 of the Germans or their big clumsy howitzers are in comparison! They harm us all the same, and yesterday, in the 11th, we had not a few wounded, including three officers.

At times, in the pauses of the guns, we hear the drumming of the partridges dispersed by the war.

Morning and evening, on changing our positions, we raise big coveys, which, scared, fly away noisily and disperse in all directions. We even see some walking about alone, uneasy, in the ravaged fields, among the abandoned sheaves of corn, which are beginning to go mouldy. How pleasant it would be, these beautiful days, when the woods are beginning to tint, to set off with a good dog in pursuit of game, unconcerned by war and grape-shot! I have often these thoughts of comfort, of family-life and the fire-side; and God knows how far off all that is.

Better not to think of it, in order simply to do one's duty from minute to minute, without even troubling oneself over the question as to whether it is hard or easy to accomplish.

*September 28, in the trenches.*

We are again in the trenches since yesterday evening, after being two days in reserve.

In this last attack the 11th again lost not a few men and several officers. We shall soon have not a single one left. How many lives this war will have cost us! But we must retain hope in victory, whatever may be the price we pay for it. Great sacrifices strengthen and purify nations as they do individuals.

*October 1, 1914, opposite Dompierre, west of Péronne (Somme).*

Notwithstanding the general optimism of the country, which circumstances seem to have justified, hostilities may last much longer than people thought

at first. For though the formidable German offensive has been definitely shattered, its presumptuous plan checked, there still remains much work to be done to drive back these savages and make them go in the contrary direction to the one they followed so rapidly, alas! on the roads of France.

This district, where the smallest isolated object stands out several miles away, and where the artillery, once the range is known, sweeps open unobstructed expanses, is not very favourable to the movements of troops. Consequently, during the day we hardly stir. From lack of cover we create it by digging deep trenches, in which we crouch like foxes, under pain of being immediately bombarded or saluted by the sharp smack of German bullets. All movements are made at night; and it is then we eat and that orders are sent. We have been living in this way for the past three days in the strong line of trenches we ourselves dug on coming to relieve the unities of the 20th corps, which held the out-posts here. Six hundred metres in front of us are the outskirts of Dompierre, a big village spread out on the plain, which, after being occupied by the Germans, then taken by us, was again captured by them the day before yesterday.

Along the whole length of the outskirts opposite us, Bavarian companies are entrenching as we are; and we spy at each other over the embankments, sending bullets every time a too inquisitive observer risks his *béret* or spiked-helmet above the protecting bank of earth. In this clear weather there is an almost continual exchange of bullets, whistling over our heads. . . .

As to fatigue, during these days of almost complete inaction, we hardly feel it; at the most lack of sleep makes the eyelids somewhat heavy and the mind sluggish. It is cold we dread the most. Let us consider ourselves fortunate as long as it keeps fine, for rain is the worst thing of all under these conditions.

Yesterday afternoon a big flock of sheep, abandoned between the trenches and wandering about, was injured by the 105 mm. shells falling near it. Two wounded sheep remained on the ground near the trench occupied by my company, so I authorized two men to fetch them, by crawling through the beets.

There and then they carried them behind a big stack of straw, where they skinned and cut them into quarters, which were divided among the company. The cooks in the village prepared them with the ordinary food, so that about two or three in the morning I found myself nibbling a mutton chop, whilst stamping my feet under the stars. Strictly speaking, the chop was cold and its fat congealed, but in wartime—Eh?

This evening, at the advice of the major, I am going to try to have entrenched kitchens dug behind each section—kitchens sufficiently deep and broad to enable the cooks to move about in them at their ease and without being troubled by bullets or shells. At night-fall I shall send fatigue-parties to fetch wood, water, pots, and to get the rations; and I hope that they will be able to manage to do the cooking on the spot, in these holes. At any rate, in that way we shall eat our food warm, and in the

present weather that will be very welcome. I have a few shrewd men in my company who will be able, I hope, to accomplish successfully this little enterprise of installing battle-field kitchens.

*October 3.*

We are still living underground, somewhat after the manner of the mole or fox. Our mission is wholly defensive; the only thing we have to do is to hold our positions, without losing an inch of ground.

I occupy the post of command of the first line trenches—a veritable subterranean cavern reached by a narrow passage, as well say a fox-hole. And here I live, well-protected, sleeping on straw, in the dim light of my den.

I have a small staff around me: my orderly, three communication agents and three telephonists, installed near to my hole, in other holes, also fairly comfortable. My station is connected with the major's by a telephone wire laid during the night, even with the ground. The post is connected in the same manner with that of the brigade, which is installed at the village of Cappy. In this way we can communicate during the day without laying ourselves open to the risk of being fired upon. A telephonist mounts guard permanently at the exit to my grotto, with a 'phone, which he hands me whenever they call for me, or when I myself have anything to say to the major. In that way I report to him what I see in the German lines and give him indications to rectify the firing of the artillery, the batteries of which, installed 1,800 to 2,000 metres

in the rear, are also connected to his station telephonically. At night, I communicate to him the information collected by the patrols.

Such is war in the twentieth century. By a curious irony, it has a certain resemblance to the life of primitive man. And yet what refinement in the means of destroying each other!

Since we have been here we have ended in making ourselves relatively at our ease. I do not refer merely to my own station, which, arranged by the sappers, is a masterpiece of its kind, but to our whole organization. Little by little, the men have succeeded in making for each a tiny dwelling in the collective trench, with benches to sit down on, rests for rifles, wooden screens against splinters, straw, branches and earth under which to shelter from fragments of shells. They have made holes in the parapet for the rifles, so as to be able to shoot without their heads showing over the top. Stacks of straw, which they place at night, furnish the bedding.

Ah! Then there is the kitchen—the subterranean kitchen of which I am very proud. They are simply little masterpieces are the kitchens of the 8th company. The men, who avoid neglecting culinary matter, have taken a liking to this installation, and have arranged, in the rear of each section, a sort of subterranean room sufficiently large to be able to turn round in it, and sufficiently deep to prevent the bullets troubling them. They have covered the whole with planks, earth, straw, beets,—if need be with cloaks,—to make the light of their fires at night invisible. Therein they have arranged earthen

hearths, and thus, two to three metres under ground, attend to their cooking, without troubling themselves any longer about grape-shot. The result is satisfactory, and at least, in that way, the men eat their food warm, which is not to be despised in such weather as this.

*October 4.*

Yesterday afternoon, the general of division sent an order to the major to attack the village of Dom-pierre, which the Germans occupy, and where they are firmly entrenched. Accordingly, I gave immediate orders to the two companies and the machine-gun section of the first lines, and anxiously awaited the opening of this attack, the result of which terrified me in advance. As was to be foreseen, as soon as these first elements debouched they found themselves immediately under the fire of the Boche artillery, machine-guns and rifles, only part of which our fire could combat. Under these conditions progress was impossible. The attacking companies hung on to the ground and began there and then to dig themselves in, abandoning the forward movement, which condemned them to a good dressing—to the last man. When night came, the colonel who commands our 56th brigade brought the company back, leaving only a few men in the trenches to hold the conquered ground. That cost us twenty to thirty men *hors de combat*.

We must live underground from the hour when the mists of morning rise until those of night descend. The day passes in observing, in listening to and in

studying the habits of the moles, earth-worms and other animals with which we fraternize. In my lair, last night, I was very puzzled by particles of earth falling from time to time from the roof on to the straw by my side. Rather anxious, I asked myself if my dwelling were threatening to collapse, and if I were about to be buried alive. This morning, in daylight, the same phenomenon occurred, and I was quickly supplied by the reassuring explanation. It was due to the moles which, in excavating their tunnels, encounter my hole and pierce a window, through which they pour their surplus earth. Just now I have had to set to work several times to impose silence on one of these animals, which at all cost wished to have an opening into my grotto and persistently destroyed the barrage set up against him. There are also worms, enormous and slimy, which bore their canals through a soil in which they do not encounter a single stone. They spit at us horrible little earthy spirals which we see growing from tiny holes and which squash as they fall on our head or clothes. Finally, there are mosquitoes, and these, though the smallest, are the most troublesome of our associates. Whence they come I cannot say, but their number increases daily, and now they are legion. And they are not the diminutive pattern of mosquitoes,—those for little girls with delicate skins; no, they are the fat and substantial species for vigorous adults, big eaters and steeped in vice, and whose bites swell and itch horribly. Their exasperating buzzing is in our ears day and night; and it is no use for me to ask the telephonist who stands at the entrance to

my lair, smoking his cigarette, to send a few puffs of tobacco-smoke into my bedroom, for these devilish insects are only the more offensive. Decidedly, these mosquitoes are the “bonâ fide article.”

In short, do not pity me, for I am not to be pitied. The hardest trial is not for us who live a life of action and have a part to play in the present drama. It is rather for you that the trial is cruel, for all those who remain chained to obscure duties, probably more meritorious than ours, and who are condemned to the torture of long days of anxiety and waiting, when the most enduring courage must find a difficulty in not being exhausted.

*October 6, in the trenches, opposite Dompierre.*

We were told this morning to suspend any forward movement. The last night but one I had already marked out and begun a new line of trenches about 150 metres from the one I occupy. During that time the engineers dug a communication uniting my station to the trench itself. These interesting operations were to be continued to-night and the following nights, but now that fresh orders have come I no longer know when we shall resume our work.

And so, as before, we burrow in our holes, slumbering or inspecting the neighbourhood. Some, heavy with sleep, recline on the straw; others, smoking, are thinking perhaps of something very vague; others again are sewing on buttons or mending tears in their clothes. A few are writing. Another group is holding an interminable conversation, returning

indefinitely to the same subject. But you feel indeed that they are all somewhat in a state of lethargy. Life has slackened, physically and morally. The wick of the lamp has been turned down until it is but a night-light. This evening there will be a revival, the wick will again be turned up, and until to-morrow morning activity will reign. The Germans, moreover, do almost the same; during the day we see nobody in their trenches. But if one of our men shows himself a little too much, a whistling bullet comes to inform us that everybody, however, is not asleep over there. But at night-time they also leave their shelters; the village chimneys smoke here and there, showing, doubtless, where their kitchens are situated.

Two or three nights ago two sentries of the 30th of the line, which occupies, on our left, trenches very near the German lines, were lucky enough to capture several Germans, who, carrying in the darkness a stew to their comrades, made a mistake over the trenches and brought it to the trench of the 30th. Seeing this, the sentries took care not to fire, but hid themselves in order to allow them to draw near; and had only to jump out upon them to capture quite easily both cooks and stew-pots, which contained an excellent *ragoût de mouton* that was most profitable to our gallant foot-soldiers.

The days are grey, with a misty sky; a fresh breeze brings little squalls from the north and sometimes in its train that fine clear spray which, since it hardly wets, is not to be called rain.

How this weather carries back my recollections, in spite of myself, to similar autumn days spent at

Llonnes, amidst those peaceful scenes whose smallest familiar details I can conjure up without an effort! I can see myself, under a sky absolutely like the one to-day, following the capricious track of a rabbit through the underwood of the Bois des Ayes; or else strolling under the great oaks of Fontaine-Froide, which are visited at this season by noisy flocks of ring-doves; or again at Fromenteau, listening to the baying of the hounds on the track of a fox, whilst the wind ripples the surface of the pond, raising as it passes the round leaves of the water-lilies; or elsewhere,—no matter where. . . . There are so many spots I have visited, where I have left behind a little of myself that I could prolong this excursion without exhausting any part of my recollection. And then, there are all of you, gathered around the distant hearth. It is better not to think of that, but to see no further than these two earthy walls. . . .

C—,  
*October 10.*

This time I write to you no longer from the bottom of a trench, but from an interior the modesty of which does not prevent me appreciating its hospitality infinitely. At the corner of a stove, seated in a real chair, at a real table and under a real roof, I find myself transported to an imaginary world where I seem to be in a dream. That is because we lived for ten days and ten nights in the trenches. So, the evening before yesterday, we were relieved by another company which was resting here—the

village of C——, and we replaced it, to live a life of beatific tranquillity.

But before our departure the Boches, anxious to say *au revoir* to us, treated us to a little concert, in the village of Dompierre itself, a few hundred metres from our trenches. Their band played for nearly an hour, at night-fall, and in our lairs we heard, attentive and silent, the tol-de-rol of their pot-house ball coming from the centre of the village and awaking echoes in the shell-devastated countryside. With what a strange and indescribable picturesqueness this laboured and almost barbarous music was clothed at that hour and under such circumstances! . . . It was a splendid opportunity for sending a few big 155 mm. shells into the midst of their fête. But our artillery men did not hear; we alone, in the advanced first-line trenches, had the privilege of this first and memorable hearing, of this unexpected concert opposite our trenches. What must be the mentality of these people? And why this street music at such a place? Is it done out of bravado or for swank? Is it a means adopted by the officers of heartening their troops, whose keenness is considerably blunted? However that may be, this is not an isolated fact, but indeed a foreseen part of their complex organization for war. Anyway, I shall remember the execution—mediocre, moreover—of their national German and Austrian hymns better than the most exquisite and best interpreted hours of music, listened to in the comfortable hollow of a stall.

In this village of C——, which, out of inexplicable respect, is spared by the German howitzers, we live

in peace, enjoying the sweetness of all such comfortable rarities as fire, warmth, cooking just as you like, water to drink and especially to wash yourself with, and soap—good Marseilles soap which often gives more pleasure than a piece of bread after ten or twelve days underground. This village is paradise,—almost too beautiful and too good; for I note that well-being is not a good thing for the rank and file, and that the more comfortable men are the less you get out of them. I myself feel remorse at delighting in this quietude; and it seems to me that I'm no longer worth much when, as to-day, I've a mattress to sleep on, a roof over my head, and wherewith to satisfy my gluttony.

Yesterday evening I dined at the major's table with the Abbé Paradis, whose kindred I know so well. This most sympathetic and devoted young priest is voluntary chaplain of the ambulance of the 28th division, and renders great service to all, riding on his bicycle all day from one to the other, with the Red Cross armlet on his left arm and the forage-cap of a military nurse on his head. He is arranging a military mass to be held to-morrow in the beautiful church of C——, the interior of which has been silent for two months past, and where he hopes to gather together a certain number of soldiers to speak the good word and instill a new spirit into them in the true light of faith. He asked me (and I accepted with pleasure) to play the harmonium, if we are still here to-morrow. It was a real pleasure, and not one of the least of these days of repose, to converse with him and the major, to meet with congeniality, ideas in common, and to feel, in the company

of men of the same status and same ideas, a little more at home.

But upon the whole we all here belong to the same family and sail towards the same harbour. Only, one has to be perfect in order never to feel more at ease with some than with others. This is the ideal of charity: to be as good, as benevolent, as devoted to all, without distinction and without giving way to the attraction of one's personal affinities.—Yes, but what would then become of friendship?

The days are exquisite, moderately warm and delicate in tint, equally different from the crudities of our summers and the gloom of winter. Imagination is quickly on the wing through this softened light towards all the familiar horizons of the little home-land,—towards the Grenoble valley, lazily stretched out in a bath of gentle sunshine, at the foot of the already torpid Alps,—towards the ruddy country of Llonnes, along which run yellowing forest-trees, where the game (at rest this year) shelter.

Bah! come what may! What matter, after all?—if really eternity lies before us, what matter life or death? It is but a little incident, a projection on our road which stretches towards infinity. In that case . . . so much the worse! . . . It is enough to carry out the duty of each day and of each moment if we know how to perform them. And then, often, what we desire the most is what we ought to fear, and inversely. We know nothing whatever; we live like a tiny piece of stray wreckage, tossed about on a limitless sea. And yet there is indeed a

land we ought to reach,—some unknown shore, at an hour we cannot know.

C—,  
*October 11.*

A fine and happy Sunday this time, amidst the quietness of this little village with brick houses, and under a pale autumn sun. To-day, a true day of rest in all ways, has all the advantages of this season when the weather is fine. The sky, a timid blue, is every moment veiled by clouds which are almost mist; the sun, whose too rare rays we court, is only moderately warm and already shy; the trees, variegated with gold and russet, are shedding their first leaves on the passage of northern winds; the nights, coming too soon, are already long; the dawns sluggish and wrapped in fog. The general effect of this harmony is somewhat sad, but enveloping in its charm, which prepares the way for us towards the bitter cold of winter.

Yet, however quiet the day may be, a low rumbling, as of a distant storm, comes to us from time to time from behind the extensive horizons; or else, suddenly, the savage roar of cannon rends the air quite near the houses which shelter us, and remind us of the facts, of the reality from which we wish to escape.

I believe I told you yesterday of the military mass which the Abbé Paradis intended to say this morning. We had this soldiers' mass. Numbers of them came from here, from the nearest villages, and even from the trenches in the firing-line, where

a few were authorized to seek this satisfaction. They came in such numbers that this church of C—— had a difficulty in holding them all. Very meditative and fervent, they assisted at this mass celebrated for them; listened with fervent attention to the few generous and manly words spoken by the chaplain; and sang with their unskilful voices a few of those old hymns which all little French boys have learnt to know. A most touching ceremony, I assure you, was this mass, piously followed by four or five hundred soldiers of all arms and ranks, with the priest assisted by two captains, an artilleryman and a doctor, and those prayers repeated by every mouth—prayers for France, and the flag, prayers for all the comrades already left behind, prayers for those left at home, for parents, the old people, the women, the children, and for all the weak ones who have not the happiness to be able to work with the others.

Many came there, many confessed and received the Holy Communion who for long years had not directed their footsteps to church,—forgotten through negligence, or deserted through egoism or self-interest. Here all these smallnesses disappear, trial has swept them away, and left to one's own resources every one here seeks for a support which he finds nowhere else.

War, to say the least, possesses, like all great sacrifices, an undoubted purifying virtue. Regeneration comes through sacrifice and suffering.

In addition to the hymns, “*Nous voulous Dieu!*” and “*Pitié, mon Dieu!*” popular tunes well-known to all which I accompanied to the best of my ability, we had a choice piece, Gounod’s *Ave Maria*, admir-

ably sung by a tenor of the Opéra-Comique, who is a mere *chasseur* of the second class in a battalion near our own.

Two other masses—one at eight, the other at ten o'clock, and both the usual ones of the parish—again brought together more soldiers than civilians.

This is the first time since the beginning of the war that we have spent a real Sunday and have been able to make it something like the Lord's Day. But, after all, you always do well when you perform your duty, and there is doubtless still more merit in spending a Sunday under fire or in the trenches, if you conduct yourself worthily, than in church and far from action. If God permits war the best way of serving Him is to wage it and perform above all one's duty as a soldier.

*October 14.*

Once more dawn to-day found me in the trenches of Dompierre. A sad morning after such beautiful days! If it is true that in this district fine and bad weather come in equally long periods, this grey sky from which an impalpable but persistent rain descends is a somewhat disquieting prospect and threat. I dread this horrible autumn rain, which will convert our trenches into muddy, slippery and insalubrious ditches, almost more than bullets. Trench life is about to become arduous. But one must not complain—one ought not, moreover, ever complain. We have just spent five days of complete rest in billets, where every one has been able to recruit his strength.

*October 16, in the trenches before Dompierre.*

Yesterday I received the visit of Major Messimy, ex-Minister of War, who is attached to the staff of the 14th corps. He came as far as the most advanced trench, took an interest in all our work, inquired about our health, revictualling and moral, which appeared to him to be satisfactory.

C—,  
*October 18.*

Again we are in this village, a place of rest and delight where the companies come in turn to recruit their strength between two periods of trench-life.

By the reconstitution of the 51st, which, since September 1, was merged in the 11th, we have lost a large part of the battalion. Consequently, the companies of the 11th are considerably reduced. Fortunately, I myself remain with the 11th, the command of the 6th company of which I retain. These incessant modifications, which oblige us to change officers and men,—to leave our men at the very moment we were beginning to know them, to become attached and take an interest in them, constitute one of the most disagreeable features of the campaign.

We are being re-equipped. Clothes, shoes and camp equipage are sent us; we are furnished with warm things for the winter: knitted vests, belts, socks, coverlets, etc. This makes us anticipate a campaign prolonged still further into the cold season. To-day again we have received a whole consignment

of warm clothing, the gift of the City of Lyons. People are thinking about us over there; and it is with gratitude and emotion that we put on these articles of clothing knitted for us by you and all the dear ones we have left at home.

As on Sunday last, we had this morning a military mass, attended by a crowd of soldiers of all kinds. On this occasion it was a violinist of the grand Witkovsky concerts of Lyons who played some very fine pieces. His violin, borrowed from the village watchmaker, had a very distant relationship to a pure-toned Stradivarius, but the executant's skill saved the mediocrity of the instrument, and, in brief, the result, under present circumstances, was excellent.

It is cold. Flocks of starlings and ring-doves pass swiftly across the grey sky. This points already to winter,—winter with its austere and silent poetry.

*October 21, in the trenches east of C—.*

Letters arrive decidedly better since we have been in the north. Happy moments are felt in the trench when the men on fatigue-duty return from the village, bringing with them the little oblongs of white paper on which we quickly recognize the familiar handwriting. I could not express the magnitude of my loss if these letters were to stop coming; and I pity from the bottom of my heart those poor beggars, without either families or homes, who never have this consolation. They possess ten times more merit than we do, for a letter from home makes one forget many things.

The war has considerably changed since the beginning, and the days we have been living the past month hardly resemble those we spent in the Vosges. There, there were daily fights, attacks, bayonet charges in the pine-woods against an invisible enemy. Those were the bloody days of Dijon and of Launois, where we left so many men and officers on the field. Here it is almost siege warfare,—the economical defensive, in which it is no longer a question of gaining much ground, but of holding it and avoiding losses in men.

That is quite different. And then we must indeed recognize that we have profited by the war, and that, at our expense, the Germans have taught us many things. It is painful and somewhat humiliating to have to admit that they have taught us the art of warfare, but we must do so. The utility of intrenchments and the way to organize them, the use of artillery and the indisputable importance of batteries of heavy guns—these and many other things they have taught us since the beginning. But alas, experience will have cost us dear.

We must persevere until the end, for it is now a question of perseverance. The one that can stand the wear and tear the longest (moral as much as, if not more than, physical wear and tear) will gain the victory. Whatever comes will be by the will and permission of God.

What the supreme good is, we cannot know in this life,—blind mortals that we are. All we can know is that everything which happens is for the best if we will only accept it as the decision of God, who is wisdom and goodness. Nevertheless, for it

is easy to reason about infinity, I should like my presence in this world never to be the cause of any suffering for you whom I love most; I should like you not to be anxious about me during these weeks and months of trial, and also that you should rejoice as much as possible at everything fortunate which comes my way, even in this time of war. For everything is relative. Am I not to be envied being in good health, when so many others are suffering physically? Have I not everything that a soldier on campaign can desire the most: the certainty of the deepest and most disinterested affection, whose echo is often brought me in letters? Have I not also, in addition to bodily health, peace of mind, since, being indispensable to no one materially, I have only to think of my soul, which neither bullets nor shells can touch?

*October 22.*

We get used to everything—even to the fox-like existence we have been leading here for more than three weeks. We occupy ourselves daily in perfecting the trenches, so as to turn them into real redoubts—little mole-cities with passages which connect the fragments of trenches one with the other, lead to the kitchens, the posts of command, etc. You can walk for half-hours in a veritable labyrinth of trenches, excavated the height of a man.

In certain trenches, where the irrepressible fancy of the French soldier has been freely exercised, little pieces of wood stuck in the clay walls at the bifurcation of passages serve as sign-boards, worded

humouristically. Not only do I authorize these ornaments, but I am glad of them, as a favourable indication of an excellent moral. To be always on the point of chaff—under all circumstances even the most critical—is one of the characteristics of the French mind. Even on the worst days, I have noticed what close neighbours jocularity and tears are, and how sometimes they succeed each other rapidly. Is this a defect? Sometimes perhaps.

The Germans, who are at the antipodes of this turn of mind, make it one of the greatest reproaches they address to us by declaring with a sort of disdain that the French are “frivolous people.” But in spite of their opinion, or even because of it, we French stand up for our ancient Gallic blood, and we alone know how to estimate its value, as we alone know how to taste as connoisseurs our good French wines. So much the worse for all the stupid sausage-eaters and rigid doctors with gold-rimmed spectacles.

*October 23.*

A little sunshine by chance. Almost a warm day with a southern breeze. Fine weather for the larks which sport in the light, as well as for the aeroplanes which pass and repass in all directions since this morning. In such weather life in the trenches is not very hard.

I hear to-day that I have been made a captain. What an honour! I never thought, on receiving my first stripe, that I should obtain the third so quickly.

C\_\_\_\_\_,  
October 25.

This is the third Sunday we have spent here, at rest,—enjoying the pleasures of a quiet day and taking delight in the healthy dominical joys of the mass of which we have been deprived so long.

For every Sunday there is now a military mass at six o'clock, and each time there is something better than on the preceding occasion. This time we had the buglers of the battalion, whom the major authorized to stand in the gallery, where, on the elevation of the host, they sounded the general and, at the end of the mass, merrily played the refrain of the 11th battalion. Almost only officers at this mass. The colonel commanding the brigade, with his staff-officers, in the first row; then the officers of the artillery, the *chasseurs*, the engineers, the infantry, and the doctors; the whole forming a variegated line of blue, red and black.

This morning, besides the buglers, we have had some pretty violin and harmonium pieces, and songs in two parts; and all full of such generous feeling and good will that in spite of all it was almost good music.

The good Abbé Paradis, who exerts himself to the utmost, is delighted. He addresses little speeches full of enthusiasm to the gatherings of soldiers. If we are still here on All Saints' Day, he intends to organize a mass chanted to music. Because this All Saints' Day, which will never have counted so many recent dead, never seen so much recent mourning, will be for all a touching ceremony and an

occasion for prayers. The death-roll will be long this year.

We shall soon have been here a month. Although everything has not come to an end, and the faithful 75's, like good watch-dogs, utter from time to time their harsh barks amidst the stillness of this beautiful autumn, one nevertheless enjoys here an impression of rest, after the arduous days of the Vosges, where we were always in a flutter, always at the mercy of rifle bullets or a bombardment, and where hardly a day passed without gaps being made in our ranks.

I told you the day before yesterday of my promotion to a captaincy. At my age, this is a very great honour, and I tendered my warmest thanks to the major. Up to now my company has not done badly; but since the command was entrusted to me we have never had a very dangerous mission; and I am waiting, to know what it is worth, until I have seen it under fire. I do not wish for it, because days of battle are cruel. But it is none the less true that they form men and that it is only then we see of what they are capable. One must not wish for or desire anything, but accept wisely whatever happens and strive to conduct oneself as well as possible. But I trust I possess good elements. Above all, I should like to have my men's confidence and esteem; only in that way can you obtain authority, and you must set an example to lead those you command.

Stripes, in war time, bring far more duties than rights. To be a good N.C.O. and a good officer, you must possess many and very rare qualities: devo-

tion, determination, courage, intelligence, common sense, coolness, and I know not what besides; as a matter of course, one must have all qualities, be perfect, as in all callings when you would fill them properly.

Consequently you must not count on yourself but on the grace of God. Only in that way, under such circumstances as the present, can you find the means of doing your duty. You realize that you are nothing yourself, that you can do nothing by your own strength, and that you must make yourself a docile instrument in the hands of your Maker. Ah! how virtuous one must be to act well!

*October 31.*

Here we are on the eve of All Saints' Day. This feast, so full of sweet consolation for those who believe in eternity, is to be celebrated this year with more fervour than ever.

There is so much fresh mourning since last All Saints' Day. Notwithstanding its sadness, it is one of my favourite feasts, because it is one of those which reminds us the best of all the strength and profound peace we can find in faith. This year, much more than in former years, it will be an opportunity to seek that courage, resignation and hope which are necessary to all of us in order to proceed unfalteringly to the end of the trial which God demands of us. At the same time it will be a means of uniting us more closely in prayer, which knows not separations.

To-morrow morning you will be going to mass all together; you will communicate piously and pray for us.

When, afterwards, you return home for that feast-day lunch which I recall as one of our joyful times for assembling, you will again think of us,—of Jean, whose whereabouts I know not, and of me who cannot fulfil, on this feast day, to my great regret, my duties as a Christian.

But my first duty at this time is my duty as a soldier,—it sums up all others.

As on recent Sundays, the Abbé Paradis has organized for to-morrow at C—— something superb, with choirs, a military band, and I know what what besides. I should have loved dearly to be present, to pray and to communicate with the others.

Since that is impossible, I shall spend my All Saints' Day in the trenches. God hears prayers no matter whence they are offered up to Him. I shall ask Him to protect us all, to grant you His grace, and to lead every one of us under His protection until we meet again, for we know that this meeting—wherever it may be—will come.

The autumn here is beautiful. There has often been a threatening sky, but up to now none of those interminable downpours which last weeks.

It is somewhat cold. The generosity of those (man and woman alike) who, like you, remain at home foresaw this trial, and the woollen goods sent us are much appreciated at this time.

My company and I occupy a new trench, quite near the German lines. This nearness has the advantage of sheltering us from the artillery, but, on the other

hand, it exposes us more to bullets. My company, which had suffered no losses for a long time, had a man killed yesterday; and but a few moments ago another was shot dead, a yard from the spot where I am writing, whilst he was watching a German head opposite and was getting ready to aim at it. The German foresaw it and sent a bullet which, passing through the loop-hole, went right through his head. He died immediately, without pain and without a moan. If I am to die in warfare, I would die like he did—swiftly, without either the dread (he was in the act of joking) or the suffering of the pangs of death.

Such is war. Daily neither funny nor cheerful. But here, as everywhere, everything happens according to the will of God. Every one's destiny is to be fulfilled. You have only not to fret, but place yourself in the hands of Him who cherishes and watches over us every second.

Last night, the Germans, doubtless to prevent us sleeping, if we had had a desire to do so, made us acquainted with a new engine, or rather an old engine of former wars, which they have brought back into use for this trench warfare, so similar to that of three or four hundred years ago. It relates to bombs which they hurl from their trenches by means of an apparatus which must be a sort of catapult, or propeller with a string. The projectile, launched at a great angle, describes a very high trajectory, which the lighted fuse shows by a luminous line, and, falling anywhere, bursts twenty to thirty seconds afterwards with an infernal noise. The first they sent surprised and somewhat frightened

us. Then we saw that these playthings fell hap-hazard, with great uncertainty of aim, and that, moreover, they made more noise than they did harm. These bombs sent in all directions grains of black, dirty and ill-smelling powder, with earth, but after all not really deadly unless you are just where they fall. In addition, considering the system of propulsion, there is no precision of aim, and it is only by chance that one of these bombs can fall right into the trench. Nevertheless, one of my men was surprised and killed last night by one of these wretched engines.

A curious fact: this soldier was to come before a court-martial. I had had the sad business of drawing up the accusation.

The poor wretched fellow is wholly judged.

#### *November 1.*

A beautiful sunny day and almost warm for this All Saints' Day feast which we spend at the bottom of our trenches, for the Germans are quite near and their bullets whistle spitefully on a level with the parapets.

#### *November 2.*

Yesterday, at nightfall, I received your letter apprising me of the much-dreaded truth regarding our Jean. On reading your admirable letter, on that All Saints' Day evening, I could but repeat, in a whisper and whilst the tears flowed, the humble prayer in which all our thoughts are resumed: God's will be done!

What can I myself think and say more Christianly resigned than what you think and say yourselves? All that you have taught us, since our birth, to know and to love,—all that our poor experience has rooted in our souls,—all our faith, can bring us nothing more consoling and surer than this blind submission to the will of God.

And then, as you also say, he is henceforth sheltered from the only real dangers, the only real suffering, the only real wretchedness; he has reached, a little sooner than ourselves, the great day of deliverance towards which we are all travelling obscurely, and the certainty of knowing that he has entered into eternal peace is indeed what will best enable you to support this trial.

For one must submit to it; inure ourself to this habit, however hard it may seem, of renouncing all the material bonds which attached him to us and us to him. Alas! poor mortals that we are, these bonds cling so tightly to our hearts that the wound bleeds painfully when Providence permits them to be broken; and notwithstanding all the reasons for hope—nay, almost joy—which faith brings, we groan in our weakness as the reed bends before the wind.

Yes, God's will be done . . . and may God Himself grant us the grace to accept, with humble submission, if not with the joy of the Angels, the pain which it pleases Him to demand from us as the mysterious redemption of a more real misfortune, that our veiled eyes cannot behold. We are nought but weakness, and our sole thought when face to face with trial should be to abandon ourselves to (and in

a manner to crouch within) His will, whence spring all strength and courage.

Let us incessantly centre our thoughts on Eternity which awaits us all. By passing through the transitory life of this world we do not pay too dearly for it. For an infinity, God demands of us, after all, only small sacrifices. We do not know how to thank Him enough for not making the trial by which we purchase the happiness of a whole eternity harder. And then, is not suffering the very condition of life? So much so that, if we were absolutely wise, we ought to rejoice at having to suffer, whilst thinking of the infinite value of this suffering.

But how well I feel, alas! that we cannot escape from pain; that it is inevitable and manifold, and that we encounter it everywhere on our path. We must not seek to avoid it. We must face it bravely, strong in the divine grace which can do everything for us, and perform our duty with invincible confidence. Since we are all soldiers on the same battlefield, we must resolutely and firmly accept the struggle, and guard against all thought of cowardice or drawing back. That is the price of victory. When we are fighting for the victory we know, what sacrifice can frighten us? Let us pray,—let us pray as fervently as possible . . . and then, let us leave God to lead us where He pleases.

*November 4, in the trenches.*

So the die is cast. After having experienced the crucifying anguish of uncertainty, we are now faced by the hard truth. Without doubt, this living silence

was well designed to justify every apprehension; and like you I long since dreaded what has happened. But until the day when the indisputable proof lies before one, there is always room for a little hope, even against every probability, because our soul is created to hope.

On receiving papa's sorrowful letter, on the evening of that sad All Saints' Day, I did not experience a great surprise but only intense grief, whilst thinking of your sorrow.

Like you, I am certain that Jean is now in security and blessed forever. We all of us possess the consoling certainty that God has well received this most upright, most humble and honest soul. And why not envy him in thus departing, without having to blush at anything, carrying to eternity his fresh and candid soul—the spotless soul of children whom God suffers to come unto Him.

*November 6.*

Here we are, out of our trenches and once more on the way, along the main-roads, towards an unknown destination.

We are setting off again on a fine warm day, regardless of what to-morrow holds in reserve for us.

The task of living is now ours; for Jean, release has come. We all know what his pure soul, without a tarnish, without a cloud, was. It seems as though God had wished to take it back again before its bloom was touched by the world's ugliness and darkness. Is not that, somewhat, what is called predestination? How he must pity us for not knowing that we ought to rejoice over his lot!

The suffering there is in this departure is all for those who remain. We are therefore the only victims; and one ends by fearing that it may be egoistic to suffer in the presence of what makes the happiness of our friends. Besides, life is so short, that, after all, the day and hour when each of us escape from it matters little. Is there not for all, in the beginning and at the end, the nothingness of matter, the redoubtable and consoling mystery of immortality?

Last night, under a cloudy moonlit sky, we left C—— asleep around its stone steeple. By a muddy road, between rows of slender leafless poplars, along the Somme Canal, we came to Méricourt, where we strut to-day during a period of momentary rest, until the fate reserved for us is made known.

MÉRICOURT,  
November 10.

Since we have been here, fog reigns over the whole of this melancholy district, to which the autumn season, with its grey tints and dead leaves, adds a certain strange and discreetly penetrating charm.

On Sunday we had several masses, attended by numerous *chasseurs*. In the afternoon the *Curé* of this place organized a procession to the tomb where the French soldiers who died at the end of August, when the Germans passed, before the Battle of the Marne, are buried. It is a collective tomb, which the people here have raised on the very spot where our comrades died, and which they piously keep in

order. This procession (almost entirely composed of *chasseurs*) past the tomb of their unknown comrades was most touching. There was a little address by the *Curé*, who laid a wreath on the tomb of the French; then another on that of the Germans.

8 p.m.

We have just been informed that we are to leave to-morrow morning at three for an unknown destination. No matter; we shall see. By the grace of God!

# **FLANDERS**



## CHAPTER IV

### FLANDERS

ON THE RAILWAY NEAR HAZEBROUCK.

*November 12, 6 p.m.*

We have had a breakdown, in the middle of the line, since one in the afternoon, and are lucky to have got out of the accident which stopped us here so cheaply.

Leaving Méricourt at eleven o'clock, we covered by road the twelve or thirteen kilometres which separated us from Villers-Bretonneux, where we entrained at nine o'clock, in the midst of the night, and at the very moment a deluge of rain—of short duration, however—began to fall. After the formation of the train (a fairly laborious operation in the rain and at a station which was not primarily intended for the embarkation of troops with their convoys), we started about eleven o'clock. Via Amiens and Abbeville, we rolled along the whole night, and at about seven this morning reached Boulogne, where we made the acquaintance of the North Sea, rather rough but majestic in this very windy weather. Unfortunately, the line deviates from the water's edge immediately, and, having saluted in passing the forest of masts in the fishing

port and the equally novel appearance of this maritime town, we crossed a curious country, where immense watery tracts, divided into squares by a multitude of little ditches full of water, stretch behind what look like grassy sand-dunes. In the midst of the meadows, low houses with brick walls form isolated spots of colour; whilst here and there are clumps of trees, and even true woods. To these rather austere regions flocks of crows and a few very dark coloured cows add a little life and movement. Elsewhere, the drained and cultivated swamps are being transformed into beet-fields.

In that way we reached Calais; then, without having seen anything of this town save roofs and church steeples, we were off to Saint-Omer. All along the line we several times passed small detachments of Belgian soldiers, who, standing in their long black great-coats with yellow lapels and wearing on their heads the classic forage-cap, cheered us as we went by.

At Saint-Omer we fraternized with a trainful of English troops, who happened to be stopping there at the same time as ourselves. The English are admirable. Their excellent equipment, their uniform entirely in supple khaki, their easy manners, their impeccably shaven faces, their cleanliness, their perfect coolness—all this excited our curiosity and admiration to the highest degree. They trouble themselves, besides, very little over what happens and is said around them, and put their hands in their pockets, giving one a magnificent impression of a *bonâ fide*, solid and eminently comfortable article.

All the men and the officers possess, with freedom of movement, that suppleness which all have acquired in the long practice of physical exercises, cricket or football. The men seem very young and their close-shaven faces, as is the case with almost all of them, make them look still younger. The officers, whose clothing—very finished, although devoid of luxury properly so-called—realizes that elegance and comfort called *le chic anglais*, have the air of being entirely at home here, shaving in their compartments, smoking big cigars with bands, or drinking tea. One asks oneself how it is that these people manage to make themselves so well and so quickly at their ease everywhere.

The train in question, which left Saint-Omer before us, stopped, I cannot say for what reason, a little before the Hazebrouck station. Our train, following it closely, was unable to draw up in time and ran into the end of theirs. Three or four wagons were partly destroyed, but as they fortunately contained only stores the battalion had no losses in men. On the other hand, the English train and its occupants suffered greater injury. Two were killed and several injured, more or less seriously.

We had there a sad opportunity of once more admiring their fine organization, the comfort and efficiency of their army medical service, and the splendid self-possession they maintain under all circumstances.

Decidedly, the English are sympathetic allies. So much the more as we in France utter useless phrases, so much the more do they seem to be

sparing in their gestures and words. But what a marvellous equipment! And their commissariat! The wagons are full of packing-cases of biscuits and tinned foods. You should have seen them at Saint-Omer making tea, with their customary composure, in pannikins, on the station platform.

*November 13.*

Here we are, this time, right in Belgium. The train landed us about midnight at Bailleul. From there we were taken by a convoy of English motor-buses, and, after having travelled two kilometres on foot along a narrow paved road, between two rows of magnificent trees, we landed at 4 a.m. in the village of Dickebusch, five kilometres south-west of Ypres.

Not wildly joyful, this first contact with Belgium. First of all, the weather is wretched; and then this village of Dickebusch sums up all the sadness and wretchedness of war. Along these muddy streets, although entirely paved, passes a constant stream of troops of all sorts. Cavalry-men, hussars, dragoons go by in little groups; artillery-men travel along, jolted on their military wagons; British motor-ambulances pass, covered with grey tarpaulins; and finally, almost everywhere, dispatch-riders, cyclists covered with mud from head to foot, detachments of crippled soldiers of all arms, staff motor-cars—in brief, a motley and busy swarm of men. All march past sadly but courageously in these rutty streets, between brick houses crowded with troops and refugees.

I write to you from the low room of a Flemish house. There is a regular crowd here of women, young girls with moon-shaped faces, restless and weeping children. A few silent men sit smoking short pipes, with their eyes fixed on the tiled floor. Everything is novel, strange and striking. The people elbowing each other here (Flemish refugees for the most part) are taciturn. They have many reasons for being sad. And yet they have rather the air of submitting to events passively, with a sort of inertia without revolt. You would imagine they do not reflect and have not even need of resignation to accept their sad lot, because they have no clear consciousness of their misfortune. Strange country, and strange inhabitants! How different they are! They do not speak French, or very little, and hardly know any other language than the Flemish. Is it this difficulty in communicating with others, or else is their race so fashioned? One can clearly perceive from their very lively physiognomy and bright restless eyes that it is concealing itself there behind a soul; but it seems far off and one asks oneself what is the hidden way which leads there.

Poor folk—poor Belgians, whom this terrible war has swept away like these howling autumn winds have swept along the dead leaves! What recollections these children, whom mothers or big sisters rock in their arms without being able to stop their tears or calm their cries, will have later on, when they are grown up! A first and somewhat morose contact with this land of Flanders, where the rain falls and the bitter wind blows, whilst the

window-panes tremble at the crash of cannonades close by.

*November 16.*

What tumult, what thunder under this sky across which big clouds, driven by an icy wind, are racing! Since we have been here, in the land of windmills and giant elms, there has been a perpetual crashing of shells, which fall almost everywhere. But you get used to everything—even to this diabolical music.

We are—my company at least—in a Flemish farm on the outskirts of the village of Groot-Vierstaat, where the daily bombardment heaps up each day fresh ruins and lights fresh fires. All around us the meadows are full of huge shell-holes made by the German 105's and 150's—nay even the 210's. Consequently, on the very first day, I had trenches dug, so that our men could shelter in them during the day. For it has been a perfect nightmare to me to think what it would be like if one of these terrible projectiles were to fall on the house where the company shelters when we were all assembled inside. At night the howitzers remain silent and allow us to re-occupy our quarters.

*November 21, in the trenches before Wytschaete.*

The Germans are more aggressive here than at Cappy. On the very first night they made a bayonet charge on our lines, shouting. They were received by a terrible firing which killed or wounded a certain number of them; the others turned tail. Since that attack the meadow opposite the section of my

company which received it is ornamented with half a score of scattered bodies; certain of them even fell quite near us, only one or two yards from the trenches. Lugubrious neighbours!

We are marvellously well supported by our artillery, which is in great numbers behind us and opens a hellish fire at the least firing.

Behind our trench there still remains a bit of a house where, at night, we can make a fire in the still intact stove, on condition great precautions are taken to hide the light. That, at any rate, enables us to warm tea or coffee for the men; for as the cooking is done very far off the food reaches the trenches absolutely cold. The weather has been very bitter for two days past. Last night some of my men got frozen feet and I had to have them carried away on stretchers. The cold is the hardest thing we have to support at the present time.

I live in a hole, in the rear of the front of my company. The earthen walls of my habitation tremble every moment through the formidable bursting of the German *marmites*.<sup>1</sup> I expect every minute to be buried alive in my shelter.—God's will be done!—Owing to the cold benumbing my fingers and these shells, writing is difficult.—Let us pray for each other.

*November 25.*

On Sunday evening we were released from the

<sup>1</sup> Literally “stew-pots”—the French soldier's name for the German shells; the equivalent of “Jack Johnsons,” etc., in the parlance of the British soldier.—Translator's note.

trenches in order to send us into quarters at the small village of Mille-Kruist, three or four kilometres in the rear, where the next day we received the young recruits of the 1914 class, together with a certain number of the wounded in the early days of the war, and who now return cured.—The youngsters appear to have less go in them than I should have thought. It is true it was very cold and that the poor fellows have been on the frozen roads since they landed at Dunkirk three days ago. . . . Many things, it is true, contribute to it: the cold, the damp, physical and mental lassitude; the terrible routine which creeps in here as everywhere. It is the inevitable wear and tear for men as for things. But in all this the soul alone matters; the body, if healthy and normal, will go anywhere the soul (if it is of a certain temper) leads it. The essential qualities are will-power, character, and perseverance. These ought to be durable.

The *Chasseurs Alpins* (the last to arrive on this front, where all the varieties of French metropolitan, colonial or British troops have fought) were welcomed. And the prisoner we made during the night attack last week confessed to us that it had been a disagreeable surprise to the Germans to find once more before them the *bércts* already met with in the Vosges, and that they had immediately noticed, to their cost, that our shooting was much more accurate than that of the red-breeches. You see one always remains proud of one's arm, and, even here, we retain a somewhat childish pride in our uniform and reputation.

At this moment, on a rainy afternoon, I write

to you at the side of glowing embers, which contribute a little warmth to my damp dwelling. You see I am not to be pitied; and indeed I continue to get on very well. I am often ashamed to think to what an extent the majority of my men, or even my comrades, may envy me, on seeing me always in such good health, and especially on seeing me receive so often—much more often than they do—long letters which I am ever reading and rereading. Sometimes there comes over me a great pity for those who tramp along in the ranks—the unknown, the modest, the humble, the disinherited of everything; and I find that these have really merit, unknown to any one—these men who have no friends, whom no affectionate thought accompanies along their barren way, and who never either receive or write letters. Therefore I blame myself for not knowing them better, for not doing, in as far as I am able, what no one does for them. How difficult it is to fill my part well and how far I am from it.

Others have wives and children at home. What anxiety and anguish on account of those families they have left without support! Yes, I am indeed in every way a privileged person. It would be horrible cowardice on my part—I whose task is so facilitated—to give way to discouragement. But what a debt of inexhaustible gratitude that represents towards those who make my path so easy! You to whom, after God, I owe everything—my brothers, those especially who no longer see through the deformation of the flesh,—and then all those (parents, friends, known or unknown masters) who have cast a little of the manna of

charity on my way, what innumerable creditors of time you and they are! Alas! it is with merit that all that can be paid.

BASSEYE,

*November 30.*

I write to you from a tiny little abandoned house where we have fixed up our cooking arrangements. The company is installed as well as can be all around, in scattered houses belonging to this little ill-defined hamlet of Basseye. This Belgium is populated in an extraordinary manner, or rather it was before the present occupation. In each of these abandoned houses—narrow, without storeys and with low ceilings—you obtain a strange impression: that of a well-to-do population, but one without taste. You have only to see the quantity of cattle and poultry which wander about the fields at the mercy of grape-shot, to realize the real wealth of the country, the friable soil of which must give a good return. But wealth here seems to be obscure and sad; these easy circumstances are more painful to behold than certain straitened ones. To what is that due? To the wretched appearance of these thatched or brick hovels with thin walls, which tremble or crack at every bursting shell? Or else to the disorder of these blackened and ill-kept interiors, where every object seems dirty, from the little bowls, or the long drinking glasses hung up obliquely on the folding-doors of the chimney-pieces, to the religious objects, rude crucifixes or naïve statuettes, which you invariably find on every piece of furniture, cheek by jowl

with the most common household articles. At all events, a musty smell and as it were an impression of corruption comes from these little Flemish dwellings.

The Germans systematically aim at the villages and big agglomerations indicated on the map. They wish to destroy and ruin everything, and it is pitiful to behold the state of the villages they have chosen as objectives. Everything is in ruins. Many of the houses are burnt, others have their roofs shattered, or walls broken down; there are fragments of tiles, broken timber, heaps of bricks over which one stumbles at night time; and against the sky, illumined by the moon despite the clouds, lamentable silhouettes stand out: the mutilated sails of windmills, pierced roofs, and jagged walls with unexpected outlines, or miraculous equipoise. What lamentable visions of ruin and devastation!

This evening, at dark, we return to the trenches. We shall spend two days there, then go to La Clytte for two days' rest, after which we come back here to the second line for a couple of days, and so on.

At the present time, on this front, the Germans are very quiet, after having been very active, but without success. Our artillery is much more active than theirs, our rifles are heard much oftener than theirs; and you would even imagine at certain times that they do not wish to fire. Evidently they are tired. Their commanders lead them under the menace of their revolvers and the men do not advance willingly.

*December 1.*

It is therefore four months to-day since I sat for the last time in your midst, assembled around that family table which has so often brought us together, joyous and heedless, on the evenings of cloudless days. . . . We did not then know how to enjoy the happiness of being together. It is indeed true that we are fashioned to desire something beyond what we possess.

This day in the trenches, begun in almost complete silence, ends amidst the thunder of a violent bombardment. For the past two hours there has been a perpetual concert, in which the ear, accustomed to this music, can distinguish the harsh barking of the 75's, the clear, ringing salvos of the British guns, and the deep rumbling of the heavies, which play, further away, the part of the double basses in this formidable orchestra. . . .

*December 2.*

This morning the sun rose level with the earth in an almost cloudless sky. The low hills of Wytschaete, showing their bluish outlines against the luminous east, was an exquisite spectacle.

Face to face with the indestructible beauties of Nature, at those hours when, in spite of everything, they impose themselves on the admiration, you feel a certain uneasiness at the contrast, so striking, between the peaceful sweetness of this scenery and the horror of the great drama of which it is the impassable stage.

I recollect having many times felt this feeling

in the Vosges, when the twilight cast its oblique rays on the desolated valleys where wounded men were moaning in the agonies of death. What anguish of heart I experience when evoking those landscapes of the Vosges, which were the witnesses of the obscure death of our poor Jean. When the remembrance of those terrible days possesses me, I should like to be able to drive away such painful images. Nevermore shall I be able to find charm in that district. What a nightmare again to think of all those hastily dug graves, marked only by rude crosses surmounted by little red caps! . . .

One must not pay attention to these material signs. His soul is now in peace—the only peace that nothing will disturb any more; and we ought only to rejoice at it since he is happy in heaven—happier than he could ever have been alive. What does our suffering matter?

For the two months we have been waging this trench warfare, we have never lacked what is necessary, or at least indispensable; but have we not insensibly lost in warlike value and in disinterestedness? For there is no doubt about it, sacrifice and suffering are the true school of character. Comfort, when one accepts it, is a danger—a redoubtable enemy against which one must be on one's guard. And I am sure that in these times I have still far too much leisure and comfort. Beware of the terrible danger of egoism and effeminacy. Consequently I count at all times on your prayers; there is no other source from which to draw the grace to do one's duty.

HARINGHE (BELGIUM),  
December 8.

To-day is an ancient fête-day of Lyons, and I am thinking, not without emotion, of the traditional demonstration which will take place this evening on the quays of the Rhône and the Saône, swarming with promenaders. I can see again the façades constellated with flickering little candles, from the *entresols* to the attics; as well as the blaze on the Fourvières hill, with its luminous slopes, its gigantic inscriptions in letters of gold on black, its stars, its thousands of living flames. We could hardly have the least idea of all that in our remoteness if we did not possess the power of recollection, the impression of which no present time can efface. This evening, when night descends on these immense damp plains, I shall think of all that, and shall, without difficulty, behold again that unique spectacle of the illuminations of Lyons. Who knows whether I shall see them again next year? But who would have thought, a year ago, that we should be in this position to-day?

We left La Clytte yesterday at noon. The rain, which had fallen since the day before, had not stopped and it continued incessantly the whole of the afternoon. Consequently the march along roads deep in liquid mud and obstructed by vehicles and convoys was painful. Moreover, the knapsacks are heavy with the winter baggage, and you get out of the habit of these route marches through living a stationary life. Finally, we landed last night, in pitch darkness, in our sector, in the open country, where, in the rain, we had to find quarters in the

farms scattered about the country. We are in the farmhouses of Haringhe, quite near the spot where the Yser crosses the frontier. Are we therefore going to return to France?

The Alpine battalions sent to the Belgian front at the same time as ourselves have all been mustered in these parts since yesterday and are bound for an unknown destination. I shall never have travelled so much as this year. But we see so much that is fresh that we end by being no longer much astonished. At the present time (and it will be thus until the end of the war) we live from day to day. We follow the path along which Providence leads us and no one dreams of making a thoughtful examination of it. We have enough to do in endeavouring to carry out our daily duty.

But later, when we are able to return at leisure to these epic months, what reflections, considerations and also instruction will issue from the stormy epoch we are traversing, and which will certainly be one of the greatest in the history of France. It will resemble an agitated and often dolorous pilgrimage—a spiritual pilgrimage along that Calvary which the entire country ascends, and which every one ascends on his or her part. May God have pity upon us! May He accept all the sacrifices for the redemption of the faults committed by our poor France! Let us hope that in this hard school she will have learnt the lesson. But perhaps the trial is not sufficient; and the longer and more courageously we have supported our suffering the better we shall be.

HARINGHE,  
*December 10.*

The days are long, somewhat sad in this country without relief, shrouded in mists which saturate it with constant moisture. We are still awaiting the departure announced yesterday, but now postponed until later. We have mustered ten Alpine battalions in this region of the Franco-Belgian frontier, and certainly not for nothing.

The 14th Battalion is one of the ten; and I should much like to meet Henri Gonnet, of whom I have had no news for a long time.

This obligatory solitude and deprivation of those we love the most is one of the cruellest trials of our life. I should regret my friends less if I were less attached to them. From time to time I see Major Foret, who is always very kind to me, and take great pleasure in conversing with him, in exchanging impressions, especially when they relate to the war. He also, I imagine, experiences some rather painful moments. But he is most energetic, most active, and appears to have a dread of the depressing effect of idleness.

At the present time we have entirely incorporated the recruits of the 1914 class, and our companies are of about 260 to 270 men. That is a great many—almost too many from certain points of view.

. . . The spirit displayed is now very good and there is much willingness. . . .

Whilst it grows darker outside, we remain seated in the room of the farm-house which shelters us, around a broken table, awaiting the order for de-

parture that cannot be long in coming. Thus we wait without doing anything, without thinking of any great matter. My drowsy-headed neighbours slumber at the edge of the table, or else are seated at a corner of the stove. Another smokes his pipe in silence, his thoughts far off, or wandering in space. Every one is under the influence of this dark and joyless day. If we remain here for long we shall end by becoming like these Flemish peasants: strange and taciturn. We have more and more the impression that we are gaining the upper hand, and by the force of circumstances the situation of the Germans can only get worse. It is merely a question of time. Only, one must have patience—much patience. Better not think of the future, which belongs to God alone.

After all, we shall always meet again: if not in this world, then in the next. Wherever it may be, it will be a happy moment.

HONDEGHEM (*2 kilometres from Hazebrouck*),  
*December 11.*

Here we are, again in France. Last night, by moon-light, we passed the many-coloured frontier post. Strictly speaking, nothing in the outward aspect of things marks a change of territory: it is the same flat country, with the same straight lines of giant elms, the same paved roads, the same damp fields intersected by canals filled to overflowing. Windmills spring up here and there, raising their living silhouettes in the midst of this dead countryside.

We are two kilometres north of Hazebrouck, in this village of Hondeghem, which possesses nothing either particularly beautiful or ugly. We leave to-morrow morning at two.

*December 13.*

Only a few words to-day. We made a long march last night and I am rather tired. This makes three nights we have been on the road, and we need rest and sleep. It does you good to get into training again in this way. One is not a *chasseur* for nothing.

MINGOVAL (*18 kilometres north-west of Arras*),  
*December 14.*

What ground we have covered the last few days! We have resumed for a time a roving life in billets, with daily marches. The men covered these stages fairly well.

The battalions of *chasseurs* are grouped in the district in two large groups of four and a small group of two. The 11th forms part of one of these groups of four battalions placed under the command of Colonel Bordeaux. All this—these changes and the transport of troops from one front to another—doubtless corresponds to a fresh distribution of troops on the front. Is it in preparation for the general offensive?

Come! courage and patience! Our God, who is the *good* God, will not demand anything without granting us the strength to do it, without giving way.

December 17.

We are still in quarters, in the same little village of Mingoval. But it is not for long, since we are to leave this evening. Afterwards, we shall see. We are going to have some work these coming days, and must live as best we can. Pray for me, so that I may do my duty.

MINGOVAL,

December 20.

At eleven o'clock we had a military mass organized for the battalion by a chaplain of a divisionary ambulance of the 20th corps, installed here. The band of the 11th lent its assistance and the buglers sounded the general during the elevation. The church of Mingoval was too small to hold all the numerous *chasseurs* who came. At the conclusion the band played the *Marseillaise* and the *Sidi-Brahim*.

On such occasions as this one could imagine oneself almost in peace time, at the manœuvres in some quiet—if not Alpine—quarters; but all the same there is something more serious in the air. Merely by looking at the faces, merely by hearing all these voices in unison, you feel that everybody is dominated by the gravity of the hour and the anxiety of the still arduous future. But it is a consolation to all to meet together, in passing, around an altar, and once more to find there, with recollections of childhood, an atmosphere of charity and confidence.

And so my brother Joseph, in his turn, is leaving.

You will find the house very empty after his departure. When God wills it we shall all meet again, and that day will be blessed, notwithstanding Jean's absence, which will then be so painful. Only on the other side of the grave will the meeting be perfectly happy, and without apprehension, or regret. But do not let us speak of what does not depend on us.

Our group is now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Bordeaux, the brother of the writer. We made his acquaintance recently and he appears very sympathetic. He is very fond of the *chasseurs*, among whom he has passed almost the whole of his career.

### *December 24.*

To-night is Christmas eve. What dear recollections centre around this festival, which since childhood we have learnt to love as the feast of families!

To-day, in the pale blue sky, in the awakening country, everything is preparing as for a joyous Christmas, similar to all those we have known. Meanwhile, since morning, the air vibrates with the rumbling of the guns, which thunder over there near Arras, and notwithstanding the weather, which has become fine as though by a miracle, the burden of realities weighs on every soul. Many—almost all—will suffer to-night and to-morrow under the yoke which they must bear as on other days, and which everything will contribute to make harder. . . .

It is thus because God has willed it. We must

neither moan nor complain. And since this festival tells us that God is nearer to us, we must pray to Him more fervently, put our trust still more in His infinite goodness.

I know that to-night, at the midnight mass, you will think of me as much, if not more, than if I were kneeling in your midst. And I also shall think of you as if I were over there; and our prayers will find a means of meeting. Preparations are being made, in the too small church at Mingoval, for a fine midnight mass with music, and I am sure that all will want to be present, even if we are to leave at dawn.

To-day we have received from Annecy a generous consignment of Christmas presents: dainties, chocolate, sweets, cigars, cakes of soap, writing-paper, pipes, liqueurs—everything (above all the proof of great devotion and kindness, which gives the most pleasure), and for everybody.

MINGOVAL,  
*December 26.*

So this Christmas, which we certainly did not think we should spend so far from each other when we parted in the early days of August, is over. What illusions we possessed at that time! We thought that a few weeks of warfare would suffice to give us a victory of which nobody at that time would have permitted himself to doubt. Certainly, in the admirable thrust made at the beginning, we promised ourselves in advance a triumphal march, across the Rhine, to the very heart of Prussia.

To-day minds are very different. Everywhere, not only with those who are fighting, but in the interior of the country, the exuberant and somewhat puerile enthusiasm of the early days of the war has gradually calmed down. But, in the stead of this artificial ardour, there has slowly come an intense determination, a silent and tenacious will to conquer, and confidence in a success which will justify all sacrifices. Is it not better so?

Some very fine things were said at the reopening of the Chamber on December 22—a witness to the fact that there are still vitality and energy in our poor country. It is a long time since the French Parliament translated with such unanimous elevation of ideas the feelings of the whole of France. This afternoon the major ordered us to read to the *chasseurs* of each company the splendid speech containing the declaration of the Government.

By a favour which we much appreciated, we spent the Christmas festival in quarters, in this hospitable village of Mingoval.

I shall not attempt to tell you all the emotions experienced on that night of meditation and all day yesterday, which I spent entirely with the recollection of what is most dear to me.

They did us a real favour in allowing us to be present at the midnight mass; to hear again, but a few kilometres from the German lines, the touching melodies of the Christmas carols of yore. The church is not large, and many *chasseurs* had to remain at the door. A soldier, whose red trousers appeared under his cassock, said mass. A sub-lieutenant, the officer of the machine-gun section, sang *Minuit*

*Chrétiens.* All of us together sang those naïve airs which everybody knows: *Dans cette étable.* . . . *Les anges dans nos campagnes.* . . . *Il est né, le Divin Enfant*, etc.

After the mass, we even had, in the small room where we do our cooking, a little Christmas-eve supper. The commissariat of the battalion did wonders to bring us some extras on that occasion; and the only thing lacking was that careless gaiety which we shall not recover until we return.

Really, we were lucky in being able in this way to spend Christmas in quarters. Meanwhile, others were in the trenches, in the cold and isolation; and I thought all night and during the day of those whose Christmas must have been most miserable. Especially did I think of it when going to church, in the darkness, and on hearing distinctly, in the silence of that cold, clear night, the intermittent rattle of rifle fire and, at intervals, the booming of the big guns.

How wretched to hear the music of war on Christmas night! Certainly on that night many prayers, much suffering, lives perhaps were offered for the redemption, and salvation of the country. All that cannot be in vain.

Whilst we were spending that Christmas night here, I pictured without difficulty what yours, over there, must have been: a fervent and pious Christmas, occupied especially in prayer, which is your weapon in this war. And I am sure that we were, despite everything, very near to each other at that time, closely united by thought, by the heart, by recollections. I am also sure that from their state of happy

peace those who have left us returned to remember and to pray with us.

*December 30.*

Still on my legs and in a good condition! After two hard days, I send you these hasty words and will write as soon as I can.

*December 31.*

Never have I appreciated this little village of Mingoval so much as since the night before last when we returned there after a two-days' engagement.

On Sunday we ended by attacking the German trenches before Mont Saint-Eloi. Leaving here at 8 a.m., we went straight to our first-line trenches, with the exception of two companies which remained a little in the rear in reserve.

At 1 p.m. the artillery began to prepare for the attack. For half an hour it was an uninterrupted concert. All the batteries were in action at the same time—the 120's and 155's as well as the 75's. From the trench where we awaited the hour for the assault, we watched the work of our shells peppering the German lines and sending huge showers of black earth heavenwards. The uproar—magnificent and tragic—lasted until 1.50, the precise hour at which the battalion was to debouch.

At that moment there was a sudden cessation of the cannonade; then, with admirable unity, the two companies, which were holding themselves

in readiness with fixed bayonets, surged out of the trench and dashed ahead, in a long line of sharp-shooters, almost elbow to elbow, and with the bayonets of their weapons forward. Ah! what an unforgettable sight!

And to think that it was feared that our men, enervated by trench warfare, would no longer know how to act on the offensive. From the trench where I remained with my company I saw that departure, that "flight forward" of the two companies which went to the assault as calmly and in as good order as on the drill-ground of a barracks. It was necessary to cross a sort of broad depression in the ground, then slightly mount to reach the horizon line. The German trench was on this crest at 400 or 500 metres from the line of departure.

Until the moment the first wounded fell, no one lagged behind; and the line advanced continuously in bounds of 50 or 60 metres, the men taking cover between each bound. In a very short time—a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes—the German trenches were occupied, and you could see floating there the little red and white flags intended to facilitate the range of our artillery. From his observation post the major could see his two companies clinging to the German line. Two sections of the company on the right, led by their chief, Sub-lieutenant Maître, of the reserve, even rushed into the more advanced works.

The 11th behaved splendidly. Colonel Bordeaux had tears in his eyes. In the evening, passing on horseback, through Mingoval, where the sections of the dépôt remained, he said, as he rode past a

sentry: "You may be proud of your battalion." Only, everything was not over. The battalions attacking on our right and left were not able to advance like the 11th; so that at night-fall, the enemy having recovered a little, the two companies of the 11th found themselves in a very exposed position, without liaison on their wings, to such a degree that certain parts which they occupied were common to both *chasseurs* and Boches, who, doubtless annoyed at having allowed themselves to be dislodged in this way, bombarded our men continuously. Under these conditions the situation became difficult. One of our companies had lost its four heads of sections. In the other company, Maître, the hero of the day, was wounded. The men were thus deprived of their leaders. The major had indeed sent me, at night-fall, a platoon of my company as a reinforcement, but in spite of everything, about 9 p.m., the first line, unable to occupy its isolated position without danger, fell back a little, not without losing a few men.

My adjutant, an excellent chief of a section, disappeared at that time. A strange thing,—this most brave and energetic fellow expressed a wish a few days before to hand the paymaster of the battalion a letter addressed to his wife and in which he set down his last wishes. The very morning we left Mingoval, he, who rarely went to church, attended mass and received the Holy Sacrament. What a strange coincidence!

It was especially the following night,—that of the 28th to the 29th—which was hard. A veritable tempest of wind, rain, snow and hail raged the whole

night; and the trenches rapidly became ditches of sticky mud, in which we stood up to our knees and sometimes sunk as in quicksands.

During this disagreeable night a platoon of my company again advanced under the command of one of my comrades, Sub-lieutenant de Landouzy. He went with his men to establish a trench under the very noses of the Germans, who fired continually with their rifles and machine-guns.

On the morning of the 29th, somewhat tried by the cold, the want of rest, and the tension of these two days, we were relieved by the 24th Battalion. This was made difficult by the obstruction of the zigzags and the mud, in which the *chasseurs* sometimes sank so deeply that they had to be pulled out by means of leather straps. Consequently the battalion was not reassembled until about noon, behind Mont Saint-Eloi, where we made a long halt.

We got back to Mingoval about three o'clock. On returning, the major made us pile past, buglers ahead and with fixed bayonets, as when on parade. And I assure you that our mud-stained battalion (the men were literally covered from head to foot with the yellow clay of the trenches) had a fine bearing on the tired men, making an effort despite their fatigue and the pain in their wet feet, marched to the alert cadence of the bugles. Yes, the 11th had truly a proud bearing, that evening, under its glorious coating of mud; and you felt that the men, notwithstanding their physical fatigue, had grown morally by those two days of hard work, in the course of which a certain number of them had fallen.

The battalion lost in those two days of offensive

warfare two officers killed, three others wounded and about — men disabled. Undoubtedly such days are sad; but one must admit that these trials make the men greater, that one feels they become truly better at the very time they see their comrades fall.

At all events, these days remain to the honour of the 11th, which behaved itself admirably. The general made no secret of it. As to Colonel Bordeaux, who commands our group, he was so affected that he was unable to speak. On the night of the 28th, as the stretcher-bearers carried to the rear the dead body of one of our sub-lieutenants, he bent over the stretcher to kiss him. He himself handed a military medal to a sergeant who had been the first to enter the German trench, and told the commander to draw up a list of those to be mentioned in army orders. I was able to see him near at hand on those days and I understood why papa spoke so well of him to me. He makes, indeed, an excellent impression and has won the esteem of every one in the battalion by the generosity of his manner and his heart, which one feels is brave and, under a modest exterior, free from all affectation, very sensitive.

It was with great pleasure that we returned to our hospitable quarters at Mingoval, where we spent the day of the 30th resting and getting rid of the thick mud which encased us from head to foot.

And now you see us awaiting the opportunity to perform fresh exploits.

What reflections and sad meditations this year-end, which the war has sown with so much sorrow,

inspires! Better turn with confidence and hope towards the coming year, which, we must trust, will bring us to the end of our trials.

I received several letters from papa in the course of his journey to Saint-Dié. So there is accomplished that pious and touching pilgrimage towards those "stony places" where our Jean—humble yet glorious—entered by the door of unknown heroes into happiness incomparable to any the world could bring him. I can imagine without difficulty what appeasement, perhaps, and assuaging of his grief papa found, notwithstanding the sorrowful flow of recollections, in performing the last duties to those poor remains. With what emotion I, too, shall go—God willing—to pray on the spot where my brother fell!

*January 1, 1915.*

The 1st of January! What a sad New Year's day for every one! It rains and blows, the weather is cold and the shades of night fall early. Amidst this irresistible melancholy everybody is thinking of those far away.

However, courage! The new year which is opening so terribly will see the end of this strange war. It will be the year of our victory. And that glorious and liberating peace is, indeed, what we must wish every one on this 1st of January.

Above all, I wish every one of you, whilst embracing you with all my tenderness, the deep, unalterable peace of strong but humble souls.

CAUCOURT,  
*January 2, 1915.*

It was here, yesterday, we spent New Year's day, in the course of which our thoughts must have incessantly crossed each other. For not one of us, nor for anybody, will that New Year's day have been very cheerful. The burden of all this recent mourning, the gravity of the days we are traversing, the uncertainty of the future—all this is not calculated to enliven a day already darkened by winter and a rainy sky.

But in spite of everything, at the beginning of this year which opens in the midst of war, hope springs eternal amid our sadness—the hope of a liberating victory, less distant, perhaps, than some people think.

It is indeed, I believe, every one's wish that this year will bring us not only an honourable but a glorious peace. The essential thing is to have confidence, not merely in oneself, for one now realizes one's weakness more than ever, but in Providence which directs our destinies towards and through the unknown.

I cannot tell you to what a degree, since the opening of the war, I have had the feeling that I am nothing by myself. I can in no wise understand the part I play effectively in what I do. I am like a leaf swept along by a hurricane. Consequently, do not speak to me of courage and valour. I possess none. Carried away in this whirlwind, I shall remain with it until it lays me down, dead or living, in some quiet spot. And as long as this dance lasts

I shall abandon myself as best I can into the hands of God.

Circumstances dictate the attitude or the action in accordance with which we are judged, as though we were the only masters. The only virtue, perhaps, is to know how to attach yourself to nothing and throw your life wholly into the vortex. Never during my life has my vision been so clear as now, for everything is simple for us; a single thing depends on us: the more or less disinterestedness we contribute to our task. But, sincerely, in the case of those who are not, materially, indispensable to anybody, is not the lot which is freest from doubts and scruples the most enviable one? It is the duty pure and simple, without ambages, and to know how to accept it as it presents itself is the whole of virtue. Do you not envy our poor Jean, who received it quite simply, generously, and who is now the happiest of us all?

For yesterday morning, at ten o'clock, I had ordered a muster of the company, to express to the *chasseurs* the major's good wishes and my own. On my walking into the middle of the square formed by the company, assembled in a meadow, the senior sub-lieutenant, an honest, hard-headed, stout-hearted Alsatian, addressed to me, on behalf of the company, and in a very pretty little speech, wishes for a happy New Year and success. I was quite unprepared for this surprise, which touched me deeply, and, to the best of my ability, I thanked them, saying how much I counted on the good will of all of them and how proud I should be to lead them to victory.

The major had invited all the officers and medalists of the battalion to dine with him in the evening. At the house where he lives—a little old château, fairly picturesque—they had done miracles to set up a horse-shoe table, with table-cloths, if you please, and even garlands of verdure, branches of box running between the covers. On the walls were hung flags and a few of the trophies won on December 27. The regimental flag decked the major's seat. A joyful fire shone in the fire-place. Really, in such times as these, you might have thought you were dreaming on crossing the threshold of that spacious room with its white carved panelling, its lighted candles in chandeliers, and its table laid as for a real dinner for quiet folk. Doubtless, the covers were not of silver; every one had to pull his knife from his pocket, and the plates were not changed. But all the same the result was marvellous and all the more enjoyable because we had all long since lost the habit of dining quietly and cheerfully from a clean table-cloth, ornamented with verdure. Needless to say, the meal was one of the least melancholy. You would never have imagined, to see us thus dining joyously and with a good appetite, that but a few days before we had done some hard fighting and were only a few kilometres from the German lines.

The evening was spent in listening to songs and monologues of all sorts, in which the grave succeeded the gay, the merry the sentimental, the comic the solemn. All the *artistes* of the battalion contributed to the entertainment, which lasted until about midnight. At the end, we all sang together the *Sidi-*

*Brahim*, after which every one returned to his quarters, on one of those clear moonlit nights such as I have only seen in Belgium.

That pleasant evening, which we owe to our major's affectionate amiability, will be one of our red-letter days of this war, in which impressions of that kind are so much the more striking as they are rare.

Till we meet again, in this world or in the next! Pray for me as I do for you. There, again, we find an answer to all questions.

CAUCOURT,  
*January 9.*

Still in rest-billets, but with the prospect of leaving from day to day. We have never been so long at rest, for there is perfect quietness here. Drill in the morning, cleaning up in the afternoon, and band in the centre of the village.

*January 11.*

We left Caucourt yesterday morning, unexpectedly, to take up quarters here, at Chelers, ten kilometres further south, in the direction of Saint-Pol, where we shall doubtless entrain immediately.

This village resembles Caucourt, Mingoal, and all the others: low houses of stone, or brick, or even mud; roofs of thatch or tiles. In the interior of the courtyards, the inevitable dung-heap on which fowls and geese disport. Trees almost everywhere between the houses, which they easily hide, since

the former are fairly large and the latter small. The villages are often in valleys, bottoms or hollows in the ground, so much so that you do not see them until you get quite close and the impression is left that you are walking in a sparsely inhabited country, whereas, on the contrary, it is thickly populated.

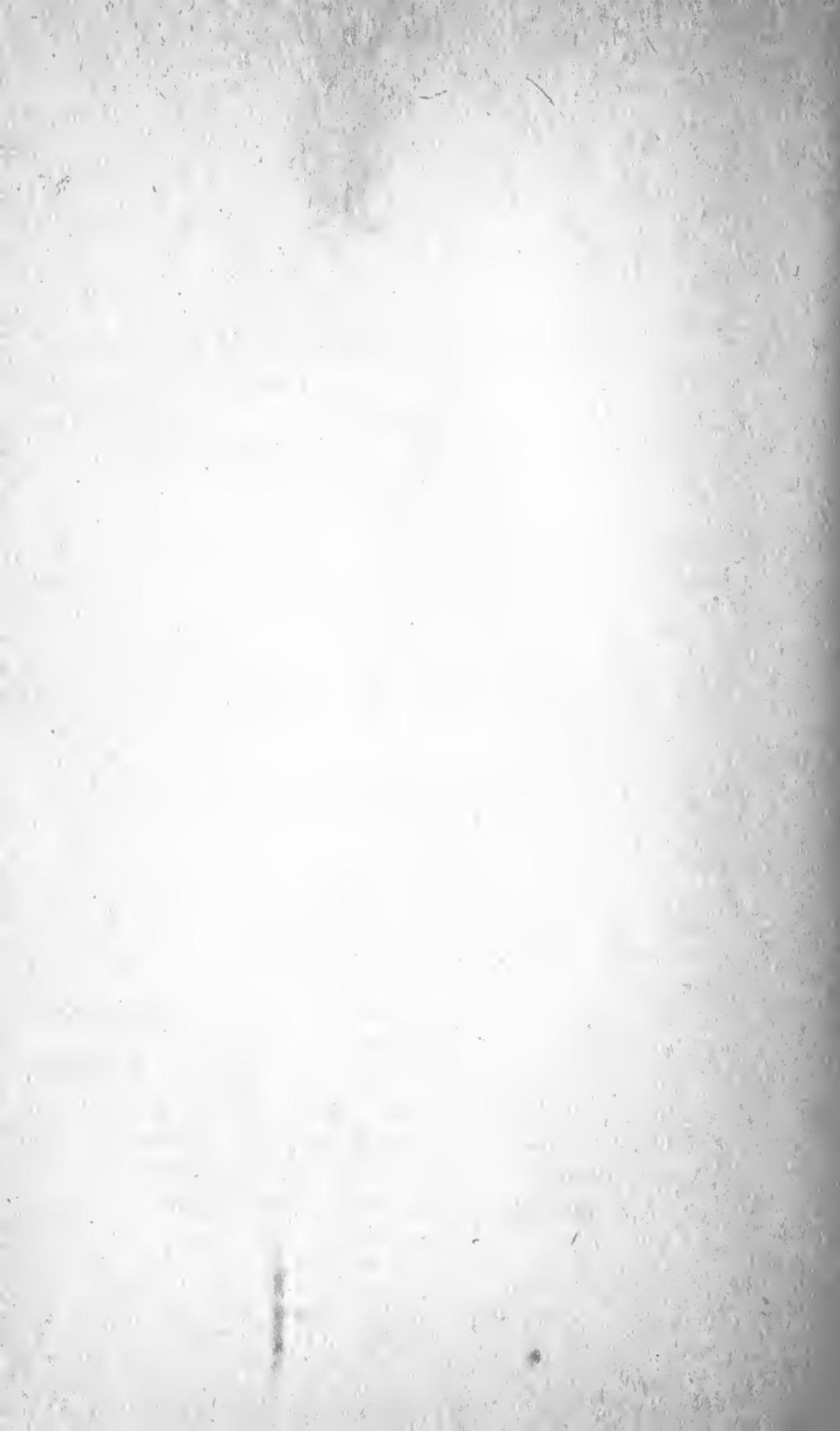
Between the villages there are few or no houses and isolated farms; but above all tillage, huge fields of corn, beet, or red cabbages. All this being at present either harvested or under the ground, the whole of the earth has especially the ochre colour of the soil, with the exception of a few meadows of a yellowish green. Low hills block out the horizon on all sides. Gentle and ample sweeps of country form undulating lines and give a touch of relief in the extended prospects. On these broad and gracefully rounded brows, the only inequalities that meet the eye are, apart from scattered spinnies, the cone-shaped stacks of straw, which almost look as though they formed part of the ground, and the geometrical silos.

In brief, apart from the engagement of December 27–28, our sojourn in the Arras district will have been a very quiet period for us—a veritable rest, since we have not had to resume trench duty. But when you are accustomed to life in the first lines, somewhat long stays in the rear result in something else than advantages. I have come to the conclusion that action, even under the most arduous conditions, is still the best thing in life. Since we have been at rest we have heard the most paltry matters discussed, disputes have arisen, feelings have been hurt, and little jealousies have sprung

up. All that, I know, does not reach the depths of the soul and will, which remain ready to show generosity and nobility; but it is painful to see any importance attached to matters about which we ought not even to think in the times in which we live.



## **LEISURE HOURS**



## CHAPTER V

### LEISURE HOURS

GÉRARDMER,  
*January 15.*

Once more we are transferred to a new scene of operations. We left Chelers on the morning of the 12th for Saint-Pol, where we got into two trains, one of which left three hours before the other. We rolled on through the night, all next day and the following night as well, thus passing via Noisy-le-Sec, the Grande Ceinture, Nogent-sur-Seine, Provins, Troyes, Chaumont, Épinal, Bruyères and Laveline, to arrive here, at last, yesterday morning about ten o'clock. And since yesterday we have been living barrack-life, almost identical to that we have all known at Grenoble, Annecy, or elsewhere.

The officers live in the town. I have a room in one of the hotels of the place.

Gérardmer does not seem to have suffered through the war. You would think you were in an entirely different place if it were not for the continual coming and going of soldiers of all arms, convoys, motor-cars, and ammunition wagons. The shops are open

and the streets lit. At this moment I write to you under the light of an electric lamp.

Women are to be seen in the streets dressed otherwise than as fugitives or as refugees. Children in wooden-soled boots pass, returning from school with their portfolios under their arms, or satchels on their backs. Bells ring in the bell-towers. Clocks are going. . . .

All this is so novel to us that we have a difficulty in believing that it is not a dream. So there are other things than muddy high roads,—other things than trenches facing the Boches, than devastated fields and shattered houses. There still exist in the world veritable houses, intact, where you live without anxiety, where it is warm, where you sleep in beds with sheets, where you hear people talking and laughing, and even playing the piano and singing. Really, it is a pleasant surprise to meet such a sojourning-place as this on one's path. Since the beginning of the war we have never had a similar impression—at any rate those who, like us, have never returned towards the rear.

We have indeed sometimes passed through villages or small towns where life was not completely at a standstill; but everywhere, in every case, war was visible in the closed or provisionless shops, in the sad and little frequented streets, in the many abandoned houses.

Here, on the contrary, every one is at home. Life follows its normal course. You go to the hairdresser's to have a shave and to the shoemaker to get a new pair of shoes. There are shops for almost everything and almost everything in the shops.

What a strange thing! What a pleasure also to feel for a moment in a civilized country, in an atmosphere which, at present, speaks to us of welfare, comfort, luxury!

Last night I slept in a good bed, in a room all to myself; I slept without anxiety and through the best part of the morning. We indulge in varied meals with unheard-of luxuries: a table-cloth, covers, salt-cellars, different plates for the soup, the roast and dessert. I have had myself shaved, cropped, washed, etc. . . . This is a great luxury, life in dashing style.

GÉRARDMER,  
January 17.

Since yesterday, snow has fallen incessantly. Winter is here at last,—the white immaculate winter we all know so well. Snow-ploughs pass along the streets, driving the snow to the sides. A number of boys go by, with heads bent against the blinding snowflakes, dragging a toboggan at the end of a cord. Others are off ski-ing.

Meanwhile, we are under shelter, in the warm hotel room, watching through the windows the falling of the snow and the passing to and fro of those who walk along the white pavements with muffled footsteps.

There is being formed here a division of *chasseurs* under the command of General Blazer. An independent division from the point of view of operations and attached to the Army of the Vosges. That is our reason for being here.

GÉRARDMER,  
*January 19.*

I still write to you from this little paradise, where I continue to find existence more than agreeable. Beautiful winter, with an abundance of pure white snow, has succeeded the rain and the wind of our arrival. In the town, sledges glide, to the muffled trot of horses, over the hardened roads. The pines, which cover all the slopes, stand up like white wax candles. Beautiful winter! What joyful recollections it evokes, this winter similar to those of our Alps, with their snow-fields, which seem to call to the skiers.

In the evening of the day before yesterday we had a surprise. About eight o'clock I received orders to set out with my company and half of another, armed with navvies' tools, to clear the line of the little Schlucht tramway. The revictualling of the troops operating in the Munster-Colmar valley is carried out by way of this pass. We left by tram at ten o'clock. On reaching Retournemer, we began by spreading ourselves out along the slope, and from midnight until 4 a.m. the men were busy with spades and pickaxes. At dawn I assembled them in the Retournemer châlet, where coffee had been prepared. At six o'clock they set to work again—a somewhat thankless job, because the snow, falling heavily, covered up the line again as fast as it was cleared. At nine o'clock a car ascended, bringing the Minister Millerand, Generals Patz and Blazer, and a whole company of staff-officers and press-men. It was not until after their return, at

eleven o'clock, that we were able to re-descend and return to Gérardmer on foot, rather tired by this work, lasting a night and half a day.

GÉRARDMER,  
*January 21.*

It is just a week to-day since we arrived here. Certainly it is the quietest and most comfortable week we have spent since the beginning of the war. The 51st, which arrived at the same time as we did, left Gérardmer yesterday to relieve an infantry regiment in Alsace. There is talk of forming out of the 11th a detachment of skiers, as already exists in the battalion which have never left the Vosges. Yesterday I was able to borrow a pair of skis and accompany my company on a march through the forest, magnificent in its whiteness. That recalled many pleasant but melancholy recollections. The country is splendid. The sunset yesterday evening, in a clear and roseate sky, was fairy-like. But I never behold a landscape, however beautiful it may be, without regretting the beauties of our Dauphiny Alps, and without thinking with emotion of the day we shall see them again together.

GÉRARDMER,  
*January 24.*

One more Sunday are we spending most quietly in this peaceful little town, where you would not suspect we are in war time if it were not for the importance of the military element in the popula-

tion and in everything you encounter. Almost all the large hotels are transformed into ambulances, where officers' wives and all those who offered their kind assistance are enrolled as nurses, or as ladies of the Red Cross. At the present time there are few wounded; they keep here only those who have wounds which will not permit of further travelling; or those, on the other hand, who, not being very ill, are to rejoin their corps at an early date.

Whilst we are enjoying these quiet days, many of our comrades are fighting in Alsace. There have been some rather violent engagements over there and certain battalions have been hard hit. The Alpine battalions—especially certain ones—will have paid a heavy tribute to the war and shed no little blood for the honour and glory of being often in the first rank. The 11th has been one of those which has suffered the most, for we must have had, since the beginning, — men disabled. That is a rather big figure for a corps the effective force of which does not exceed 1,800 men. That is to say, there is now very little left of the original battalion, although many wounded have returned to the front.

After this rest, we shall almost certainly be sent to Alsace. It is of little consequence.—We must reach the stage of taking no heed of the morrow, in living in the present, and in trusting entirely in God. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." For the moment the evil is very slight.

*January 26.*

I am still writing to you from the warm room of

this hospitable hotel, whilst it snows and freezes outside.

What a change has come over things since our diversified comings and goings among these same mountains of the Vosges at the end of August! At that time, we were still under the influence of agitation at the first shock,—we were in the period of uncertainties and surprises in this war, of cruel days when ground—and men—were lost, of unbearable nights when, despite fatigue, sleep was difficult. What painful recollections! Looking backwards, those early days of fighting seem to me still more terrible than they were, for the moral of our men, despite events, was unaffected.

The reason is that we have since become acquainted with a very different state of things, and this causes us to exaggerate, by comparison, the trials of the past. And then the thought of Jean, the vision of his last moments, of his heroic and unknown death, lost in the great whirlwind which carried so many away, the image of those slopes of the Kemberg where I myself have been and where he met his end—all this is a burden, as of unconquerable melancholy, on all the recollections connected with that brief period of the war. It could not be prolonged in the way it was then being waged; it had to change its manner, or cease, for want of combatants.

Now, it is entirely the opposite: temporization, economy, patience, prudence.

*January 28.*

Time passes, days follow one another, and we are still here. What a contrast between this sojourn in the Vosges and the first we made here at the end of August. Never again, I hope, shall we see anything similar to what we then experienced. Those attacks, those alarms, that life of surprises, those assaults in which so much heroism was so vainly wasted that it was not even noticed—all these will not be met with again.

Those who did not experience the first events of the war—the desperate bayonet charges, and the courageous but inexperienced struggles in the woods—will have seen only the semi-martial side of the campaign. It is sometimes distressing to think of all the bravery and ardour that was absolutely thrown away at that time. When, in thought, I live over again that tragic 27th of August, which will doubtless remain for me the cruellest day of the war, I see once more the figure of Captain Rousse, standing at his full height in the wood, and, with raised arms, uttering amidst the shouts and rifle-shots the last call, which he was unable even to complete: “Help! Rally! With fixed bayonets!” And again I see him, a second afterwards, falling to the ground, with bent knees and white face, as he stammered to the two men, supporting him, these words: “Thank my company for me . . . go and take orders from Captain Deschamps.”

Is it not incomprehensible and heart-rending to see an officer, who had given unstintingly the whole

of his intelligence and time for fifteen or twenty years, who had put all his heart into learning how to fight, fall in that way in a small engagement, in his first fight? But one must look beyond one's profession. . . .

No, it was not for the purpose of falling in an ambuscade in that profitless way, that a man of that stamp worked incessantly the whole of his life; and all that devotion, all those sustained efforts did not vanish into nothingness at the moment of his death. Of all that God keeps an account that we ourselves cannot estimate.

Deadly struggles are taking place just now in Alsace. At Hartmannsweilerkopf, a company of the 28th was surrounded on a spur of the mountain, whereupon the 13th made an attack in order to deliver it. The latter battalion suffered serious losses, including its commander. I cannot help feeling a certain shame at being here, protected from the cold and the bullets, when my comrades over there fight a hard winter campaign. Really, there is something captivating about life in the firing-line; and when you have left it for some time you realize better how interesting it is, as well as salutary, in consequence of its very dangers.

I have recently received several admirable letters, apart from your own. Each writer reacts against the shock of realities according to his capacity and turn of mind, and it is very curious to observe how the same events bring out a very different sound, of a special tone, in each personality.

As if all those who are so kind as to interest themselves in me knew the pleasure that letters to

"those at the front" give, I am written to a good deal deal and from all parts—Lyons, Grenoble, Annecy and even Cappy. These letters—and yours more than all the others—play a very big part in my life. Do you know that anything you say to me is insignificant: the importance of details does not arise from the nature of the objects or facts, but from the value given them by the affections to which they are attached and of which they form, so to speak, part.

At this time your letters are more than ever the joy of my life. The moral atmosphere in which we live here is, owing to circumstances, inferior in quality to that of the days which we wrongly call "bad days." Here we already feel the need of becoming disciplined; we have not the feeling of such a necessity when duties of the moment themselves impose discipline. Here we have leisure, conveniences, a comfortable existence, and we realize quite well that in this school we do not gain much. It is now, by comparison, that we estimate the price of sterner days of which every minute is like a prayer. In thinking of all this, a phrase of the *Imitation* comes back to me: "He that escheweth not small faults little by little shall slide into greater."

We must not delude ourselves: all great qualities are acquired through ordinary life; only, they have no opportunity of coming out strikingly in the uniformity of little duties. They are revealed only on extraordinary occasions, because circumstances then form a frame for them which attracts attention. But at those times you will do nothing very heroic, even

with all the desire and all the energy possible, if that improvement has not been prepared by a patient and persevering work of modelling. We are very wrong, when young and overcome by pride, to aim precisely at those great actions which are, and ought only to be exceptions, and to disdain familiar humble duties. Only the latter, however, form character and forge the will.

Let that be applied to the domain of military preparation, and we see, on the one hand, Germany, patient and tenacious, succeeding by a sustained effort in acquiring the strength which still arrests us; on the other, France with her splendid ardour and generosity, capable of the greatest heroism in a moment, but insufficient because unsupported by method and continuity. It is quite right to say that time has no respect for what is done without it.

### *February 1.*

To-morrow evening the major receives all us officers for a *Revue*, prepared in great secret by two or three of us, and in which every one will have to swallow his pill. I play in it only the modest but necessary part of pianist.

### *February 3.*

I am setting out to-morrow morning at the head of a detachment of N.C.O.'s of the battalion to reconnoitre and study the out-post sector, on the other side of the frontier, in the region of the Lac Blanc, where the 11th, about the middle of August, sustained one

of the most bloody engagements. If possible, I shall carry my remembrance and prayers to the tomb of the brave men who fell there.

There will be work to be done in Alsace,—perhaps soon, and the *Chasseurs Alpins* will have the honour of conquering, bit by bit, this precious country, which the Germans will make a point of honour of defending energetically. We must have confidence in the future,—confidence in God to whom victories do not cost dear and in whose hands war is a docile instrument. For those who survive to the end, there will still be most happy days.

### *February 6.*

We have returned from our expedition into Alsatian territory, a little tired but very satisfied.

Setting out, on Thursday morning, to the number of ten, accompanied by three mules loaded with provisions, we mounted on foot along the road winding through the pines by the Col de Surceneux to the valley of Rudlin, at the foot of the last slopes before the frontier. After lunch at Rudlin, we crossed the Col de Louchpach to penetrate into Alsace and ascend to the Lac Blanc. At the cross-road, before leaving the forest, we paid a soul-stirring visit to the humble cemetery, half buried in snow, where rude wooden crosses, mostly without names, alone mark the spot where, side by side, unknown and pell-mell, lay the remains of our comrades-in-arms.

Poor little cemetery hidden in this quiet corner of the forest! Whilst saluting, in passing, those

modest anonymous crosses, crowned with spotless snow, one experienced, notwithstanding the sadness of that presence, a feeling of profound peace and great serenity. Without clearly expressing it, one felt almost a regret that one had not fallen like them, bravely, in the first glorious weeks of the war. By an instinctive comparison, my thoughts took wing at that moment towards the similar tomb where Jean also rests in that selfsame eternal tranquillity.

Oh! no, we must not pity these comrades, these brothers who died before us. Noiselessly and in most cases without suffering, they departed from our poor world and now . . . it is for us to bear the burden of their death.

At the culminating point dominating the Lac Blanc, and whilst awaiting a favourable moment to debouch from the forest on to the closely-observed road on to which the shells of the Boches were falling brutally, we admired with wondering eyes the splendid panorama which, in that clear weather, stretched southwards, over the Jura, to the summits of the Bernese Alps. What a secret joy to see once more, even from so far a distance, real mountains like ours! You felt almost near home when scrutinizing, as you follow the fantastic line of the distant summits, the deep blue crevasses standing out on the delicate silhouette. Beyond the plain of Alsace, where a portion of the Rhine appears through an opening in a valley, the dark line of the Black Forest barred the horizon, as though to arrest our gaze, eager to explore German territory endlessly.

At twilight, when the snows of the Hautes-Chaumes begin to turn roseate, we took the pathway of the Lac Noir, spreading ourselves out in little groups so as not to tempt the Boche artillery-men, ever on the look-out for an objective. Not without being inconvenienced by a little shrapnel which came near to doing us damage, we reached the inn of the Lake, crouching under the protection of a wooded spur, and here some officers of the 52nd Battalion gave us a most friendly welcome. At night-fall they guided us, by a goat-path, to the tiny village of Pairis, the end of our march, where our surprise was great to find pretty houses intact and inhabited, comfortable quarters and a substantial dinner at the house of the *Curé*. The immunity which this delightful spot enjoys is explained by a more or less tacit understanding in regard to the big village of Orbey, which the Boches occupy at the bottom of the valley, and which we have never bombarded.

At all events, Pairis appeared to us to be a very hospitable place, and to men who have been acquainted with the devastated plains of the North and the mutilated farms of Flanders, it was strangely savoury to dine tranquilly at the *Curé's* convivial table, but a few hundred yards from the enemy's lines. The next day, in the same sunny weather we had had the day before, we spent the morning studying the sector in detail, a task made possible by the pine-woods which enable you to walk about within range of the Boche rifles without running a great risk. After this reconnaissance of the ground, we returned to Pairis, where the afternoon was spent with

several officers of the 52nd, in their very comfortable quarters. But we carefully avoided showing ourselves outside, for up there orders are strict: "Nobody in open spaces during the day; lights out at night."

This morning, at four, we set out again for the Lac Blanc and Gérardmer, where we arrived about noon, with legs thoroughly tired out and as hungry as hunters.

GÉRARDMER,  
*February 10.*

As announced to us yesterday, President Poincaré came this morning to Gérardmer to review the 11th, his old battalion, in which he was an officer of the reserve. At nine o'clock we were assembled in heavy marching order when a procession of motor-cars made a sonorous entrance into the courtyard of the barracks. Immediately—a flourish of trumpets, bugles, bayonets, and the President passed in front of the companies standing in the cast-iron attitude of "Present arms!" He then distributed a few decorations and military medals.

Afterwards we filed past him to the strains of the *Sidi-Brahim*. It was not the sad and glorious marching past as at Mingoal on December 29; but much more studied—and less impressive. Poincaré declared that he was very satisfied and warmly congratulated Major Foret.

He afterwards invited the commanders of companies and two lieutenants to a private luncheon. I was therefore present, with more curiosity than

real pleasure. A cheerful, cordial luncheon, although the President and especially the satellites who accompanied him (Millerand and several officers) are rather of the silent species, which one can easily understand. I was greatly honoured, since they placed me by the side of General Blazer, who was next to Poincaré.

One can clearly perceive, notwithstanding his studied simplicity and the absence of all display, the man's importance and the value of his time. One has also the impression that he is—a somebody. He has above all a very expressive look, which does not particularly strike one on first meeting him, but which you remember in spite of yourself when you have passed him. Moreover, like all public men, he has a highly developed sense of the value of words and can express much in a few brief sentences. He made an excellent impression on all of us.

### *February 13.*

The little fête which had several times been postponed was held yesterday evening at the major's, at the Villa Sans-Souci, and ended by being more ceremonious than we expected. General Blazer, the officers of his staff, all the officers of the 11th, and even several ladies composed, in that luxurious and brilliantly illuminated drawing-room, almost a fashionable gathering, and you would have had a difficulty in believing that we were the same men who, a month ago, returned from the Carency

trenches with mud up to our very eyes. It is a funny war all the same.

A very pleasant and animated evening. On the programme figured a few pieces of music, violoncello, songs, monologues, fanfare and especially the little *Revue* I mentioned to you, and which appeared to amuse everybody greatly, including the general and the ladies—the latter perhaps a little startled by the rather free character of certain jokes. As things are, it takes a lot to startle one. We retired about midnight; and watching the general, who is a very gallant man, open the door of his car for the ladies in their light dresses, I thought that such a scene would have been less unexpected elsewhere than there.

What a strange war! You ask yourself really how it is going to end. But it is better to think only of one's present duty. For my part, I believe that all suppositions are vain; and since up to now everything has happened in an unexpected manner and against all anticipations, it seems to me logical to think that the solution will perhaps come from the direction in which we are not looking, and that the war will end in a way least foreseen. Is not the Marne affair a proof of this? The Germans had then everything in their favour and would have entered Paris if they had insisted and if God had not protected us. Is it not with regard to this that the words of I know not what soldier have been quoted: "Conquered is he who believes he is"? Conquered especially is he whom God has designated.

*February 15.*

I continue to lead here a life so ordinary and devoid of glory that I am sometimes rather ashamed of it. But my shame is so very slight that it does not prevent me from delighting in this quietness. One quickly gets accustomed to living comfortably, with everything that is necessary and much that is superfluous. Dreadful routine creeps in slyly, draws us gradually under its domination, and, notwithstanding the gravity of the times in which we are living, we end by living here, a few miles from the war zone, with the same unconcern as if we were in the midst of peace stagnating in a narrow provincial garrison.

I am really beginning to fear that the delights of Gérardmer may be more harmful to us than profitable. Doubtless this long rest was welcomed after our uninterrupted peregrinations; doubtless also, it was not a bad thing for any of us to be able once for all to clean and refresh ourselves, physically and morally. But you must be very attentive to yourself, very vigilant, in order not to give way to the attractions of this most easy life. You get a very clear idea now of the subjection in which we are with regard to the meanest circumstances. If you are not, *à priori*, on guard against your weakness, you quickly descend to mediocrity. It is the peculiar quality of great characters never to decline, but always to remain at their own level, whatever the society and atmosphere may be. Therefore, we must bless, as the grace and assistance of God, the circumstances which, of themselves, raise us

above banalities and trifles. So by war, and for that reason we must bless it.

We experience almost daily how quickly men redescend the slope which leads to vulgarity. Discipline, when not imposed by itself, seems to them an embarrassment, a detested torture. Poor fellows who often have never received the light, the good seed of consciences in quest of the ideal! How could they find in themselves the deep meaning of duty when their surroundings, their families, their whole life have restricted them to the narrow horizon of money cares and low-minded, ignoble covetousness?

Doubtless, when they are in the trenches, when death hovers over them for days and nights, or else when they dash forward, amidst the bullets, with fixed bayonets, their personality is forgotten, or rather grows broader, is purified and momentarily becomes simple and naked. The silent verities which slumber at the bottom of their poor souls awaken at the shock of superhuman realities and illuminate them. The souls which appear under this defaced exterior are almost new. And one of the finest emotions of war is to feel all that the nearness of the infinite has been able to do in a second.

But old Adam is not dead. As soon as the charm is broken, he claims his place and would dominate again. . . .

The remedy is easy and will be promptly efficacious. Perhaps it will not be long in making its appearance, although there is no talk yet of sending us elsewhere. It is certain that, if they intend us

for any offensive mission, it will be necessary to wait until a more favourable season, for snow has again fallen heavily the last few days. The pine forests have put on again their marvellous dress and are everywhere powdered.

*February 18.*

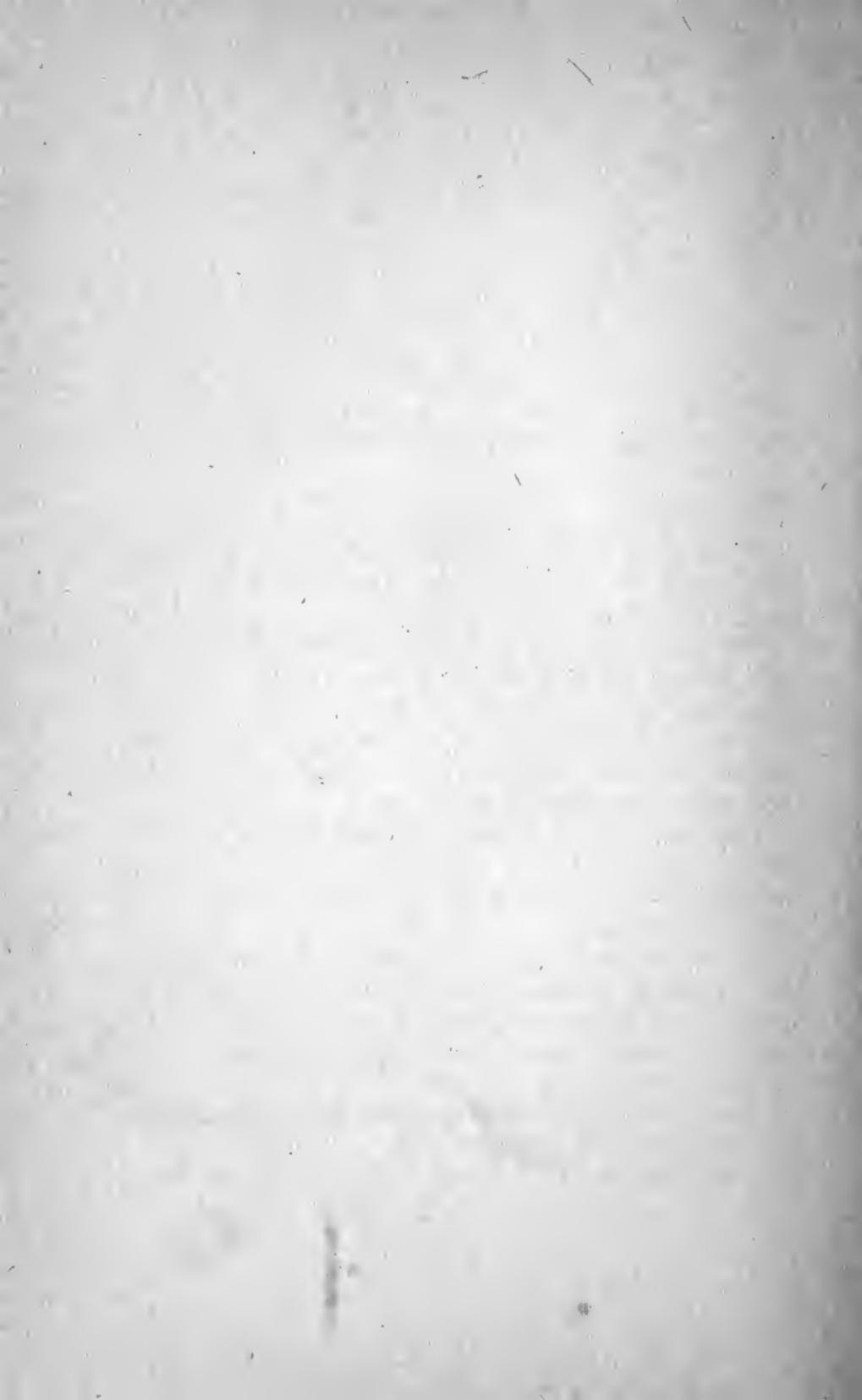
This time it is indeed my last letter to you from Gérardmer. We are on the point of departure, nay, we are even in the midst of it, since the major has already left with two companies. To-morrow I shall have said farewell to Gérardmer.

The battalion is going to relieve the 12th in the sector before Sulzern, on the other side of the Schlucht; it is therefore on Alsatian soil that we are to take up our abode.

To-day's grey and rainy weather reminds me of Lyons, to which my thoughts often turn. I never think of it without emotion and without feeling how much everything has gradually attached me to this city which I held so long in horror.

Ah! the fine projects we made there for this winter, for this school year which I have not begun and that, almost certainly, I shall not finish there. I have often asked myself what impression we should have had if we had been told, on that harrowing evening of August 1, that the war was going to last so long? I did not think, on my precipitate departure from the great city, on that hot Saturday afternoon, that the farewell was so solemn and perhaps final. It is better, to a certainty, that we should not know the future.

# THE VALLEY OF THE FECHT



## CHAPTER VI

### THE VALLEY OF THE FECHT

*February 24.*

We have been in action since the 20th, and have had a few warm encounters; and that is the only warmth we have for the moment.

We are in the woods of Sattel, below Stosswihr in the district of Munster. The Boches have attacked vigorously in the whole of this region, where we came to relieve the 12th Battalion tranquilly. They have gained ground. We have killed many of them; but they have damaged us also.

On Saturday I made—without great result—a counter-attack on the Reichakerkopf. I had an officer killed, three or four *chasseurs* killed and fifteen wounded.

Since the evening of that day, we have been on the outskirts of the wood, entrenched, in order to prevent the Boches progressing further. They appear to have calmed down since yesterday, and a fresh attack on their part has failed.

The poor 11th has suffered recently. Certain companies have been very hard hit.

I write to you in a shelter made of the trunks of

pine-trees, and on Boche post-cards bought at Metzeral by scouts of the 51st.

It is snowing and cold, but our moral remains good.

*February 26.*

The situation is less strained—we are gradually returning to quietness. The still bitter cold sufficiently puts us to the test. Not a few poor fellows have frozen feet.

We have had some hard days. Likewise the Boches, with the result that they have not further insisted.

We are all so dirty that we should be frightened if we were not all alike and without a means of comparison.

*March 1.*

Still on the look-out. The Boches are angry with us and have not yet calmed down. But last night they were very badly received and lost thereby many of their men. It will be a good lesson.

The weather is rather distressing; it has snowed incessantly since yesterday. But courage,—everything comes to an end! We are advancing towards better days.

And then . . . by the grace of God!

COL DE BISCHSTEIN,

*March 4.*

A short respite, at last! We are beginning to see

things clearly and can cast a glance at everything that has happened.

For many things have happened since we left Gérardmer.

It was a matter, not of a little isolated attack, but of a serious undertaking in which the Germans thought they would probably be able to drive us out of Alsace. They sent into action four or five regiments, fresh from the dépôts, and chiefly composed of very young men between seventeen and twenty-two years of age, all newly equipped and overflowing with inexperience. Fine game for our bullets!

On February 19, under the violent shock, we lost ground—and men. The same evening, on reaching Sulzern, where I preceded my company, I found my comrade Guerry lying in a house full of wounded, the majority of them by shell-splinters. My company having rejoined me, we were sent at dawn to ascend the Sattel.

There, order to attack the wooded peak of the Reichakerkopf, lost the day before. The men, regularly knocked up by the march, advanced after a fashion, and we gained a foothold on part of the peak. But there we were counter-attacked by the Boches, who killed one of my officers, three *chasseurs* and wounded several others. In order to avoid more serious and fruitless losses, I withdrew my company to the Sattel, where we remained until the 26th, organizing the outskirts, digging holes, killing a few Boches who were too audacious at the edge of the opposite wood, and suffering not a little from the rather intense cold, which made me lose a few men.

through frost-bitten feet. On the evening of the 26th they sent us back to the battalion which, scattered and put to the test for six days past, is reforming as well as possible in the woods of Bischstein. I found the major there—fagged out, ill, distressed by the trials of the preceding day, but still steadfast and master of himself.

Half-a-day's rest among the pines, and the same day, the 27th, we went and occupied a little ridge above Sulzern, where it was very cold and we remained shivering.

On the 28th, at night, a company of the 12th came to relieve us, for we were to take part in an attack the next day. But the Boches forestalled us, and in the middle of the night made a violent attack on Sulzern. They were badly received and left not a few killed on the spot. We again went into action, according to the necessity of the moment. It was snowing—the weather abominable. Nevertheless, the men, though depressed, did not do badly. On that night a sergeant of my company, on patrol duty, captured, single-handed, a house occupied by the Boches, killing three of them, one after the other—two with the bayonet and one with a bullet, fired point-blank.

On March 1 we were still in the field. The men took quite a lot of booty from the dead Boches, who lay almost everywhere. Finally, on the evening of the 2nd, we were relieved; and at dawn yesterday we came here to rest. This is the post of command and we are sheltered after a fashion in huts constructed, in the midst of the wood, of tree trunks and earth.

To-day our situation is better, and the weather also. Many of the men are rather unwell with colds, bronchitis, sore or frozen feet. But everything is beginning to go better. The Boches must have reflected after their last attack, which cost them dear. They are content to scatter their big shells almost everywhere towards the Schlucht. On our side we are entrenching hastily, hanging on, organizing, putting up barbed wire, erecting abatis, and applying our minds to the subject of second-line positions.

The ground lost by us under the initial shock gives the Germans the advantage of being able to bombard at their leisure the whole of this valley and the road from the Schlucht to Sulzern. Was that worth the sacrifice of so many men? Certainly, everything has not been bright for us, since we had men killed, wounded, and taken prisoners, alas! But war cannot be waged without breakage. . . .

To-morrow evening I am going with my company to relieve another, somewhere, unless something fresh turns up in the meanwhile.

Long live France!

*March 6.*

We are setting out on a little expedition which will perhaps last a few days. Do not be anxious if you remain without news during that time.

COL DE BISCHSTEIN,

*March 8.*

Ah! we have just spent a few more hard days. I have had two companies, and one of them my

own, to send into action under difficult and painful conditions. The business is now over and I must thank God it did not end worse.

It concerned an attack on the German lines of the outskirts of Stosswihr. We were unable, however, to reach the objective, and suffered pretty badly through bullets and shells. This happened on the first day—that is to say, the 6th, in the day time. When night came we were sent on a fresh mission with a different objective. The night was barren; our movement formed part of a larger programme which could not be carried out. The following day was fairly hard. In the evening, we went to the outposts at Ampferbach and remained until 3 a.m. Relieved at that hour, we returned here, where, amidst the snow-covered fir-trees, we are building Robinson Crusoe shelters. It is over for the time being.

I often think that this agitated life, full of emotions, is very enviable, and that it responds admirably to the proud ambitions of young men who would do and see everything—those who feverishly demand “to live their life,” according to the common and fatal phrase.

Yes, this life of action, always on the alert, indeed contains enough to satisfy a taste for adventure, a thirst for the unexpected, a dread of routine and ordinary existence—in brief, the whole baggage of youth overflowing with pride. Here are life and adventure for you. Here is something out of the ordinary, and all your desires are realized.

It is true: I believe that of all this, if we survive it, we shall retain an enchanted and almost volup-

tuous recollection. I am sure that those who, evacuated from the front, move towards the rear must quickly experience a feeling of dullness and mediocrity, and regret what they have left behind.

For if here, as elsewhere, we set our hearts on something we do not possess, we lead, to say the least, an intense, busy and earnest life. All things considered, a fine life, and doubtless we are not aware of how heartily we ought to congratulate ourselves on having to live it in this way.

But this also may be an illusion; again an instance of pride and "bounce." For every life is beautiful and precious when well employed. It is not imposed events, not the frame which forms the value of an existence, but the soul which reacts and adapts itself to exterior conditions. Life is to be measured by man's capacity; circumstances in themselves signify nothing, we ourselves give them their colour.

Why, therefore, say that we are atoning for the inertia of preceding generations? In this immense crucible, the world, time and space are melted. Into this infinitely complex mechanism, this intricate chemical process we are thrown atom against atom. What will come out of the whirlwind? God alone knows. But what does the knowledge of these elements so diverse and so complex matter to us? For God is there. Let us be in His hand like matter in that of the artist. Each stroke with the chisel gradually rough-hews and refines us, rids us of our original covering and brings us towards perfection. Ah! if we only knew how to let ourselves be chiselled by our Maker. Our crime—the crime of ignorance—is that

we know not how to commit ourselves to Him. It is as though the block of marble revolted against the sculptor.

What reflections the emotions of these days of war would inspire if the days most fraught with emotions were not precisely those on which you possess the least freedom of mind! It is better so, however, for action alone can save us from ourselves.

Your letters have been, as they always are, a great comfort to me. Therefore, how I should love to merit your great affection and do something really meritorious in proof of my gratitude! But that debt I shall never pay. May God aid me to do my duty with docility and humbleness until the time He has fixed. Humility!—the great and strong and beautiful virtue.

BISCHSTEIN,  
*March 10.*

We are still in the midst of winter. It is snowing heavily, the weather is very cold, and it will be still a long time before these forests resume the appearance they had at the beginning of the war. They also bear the scars and wounds of battle.

These pines have brought cruel recollections to all of us. Too many of ours—and some of the best—met their death among those trees by imprudently, bravely throwing themselves in front of the rifles of the enemy who, hidden in the thickets, knew how to lie in wait and shoot us. We have since gained

experience and are less impulsive. But that first impression is ineffaceable.

For my part, I involuntarily reproach these forests of the Vosges for the death of our poor Jean. I can picture him so well, with his natural loyalty and regardless generosity, throwing himself in front of the bullets, and falling (the obscure and anonymous victim of the hurricane) without even being noticed by his neighbours. Poor brother! Nobody looked at him,—nobody paid him the slightest attention. In the midst of his companions, who hardly knew him, he went to the assault without even thinking about the others, without seeing whether he was followed. He is among the veritable heroes of this long trial, for those whose deeds are unsung are the real ones.

But what men are unable to recognize, God sees. Devoid of display, and human glory though his death was, Jean will have found on the other side of the grave the only glory that matters, the recompence in comparison with which *our* rewards are vanities.

The last engagements in this valley of the Schlucht at Munster have cost us not a few men. Once more, I am the only officer of my company left. Fortunately, we have just received a reinforcement of 300 men, of whom I have taken fifty-seven and a few N.C.O.'s in my company.

BISCHSTEIN,  
*March 12.*

Little by little, after the agitations of the last few

weeks, we have returned to the monotonous routine duties of trench life.

For five months, shortly, we shall have been waging hardly any other form of warfare. Strange and stupid war! I can well understand the impatience of professional army men who have directed all their efforts, all their moral, physical and intellectual energies towards great warfare in the open, such as a Frenchman conceives it. I can understand their vexation at this sedentary warfare, without either engagements or movements, and in which, instead of tactics and strategy, we find merely brutality and force. To all those, the time, near at hand, perhaps, when active operations will be resumed, will be a welcome relief after their long months of waiting. The major is certainly one of them.

Yes, all this is strange and unexpected. It is perhaps a war of civilized men—this continuous struggle with shells which explode at an enormous distance —this grotesque game of hide-and-seek in which man, like a frightened beast, cowers in a hole behind barbed-wire and abatis, and brings into operation, failing himself, all the infernal inventions of his industry.

In any case, it is not a war of heroes, but of decadents. Here it is no longer individual values which come into collision, but machines, monstrous engines of war, metal and powder.

Our ancestors really fought when they closed in deathly combat with naked weapons. Yes, that proved something, and the conquerors might well be proud of their triumph. Moreover, when they had

loyally fought, face to face, during the day, they withdrew at night to rest, free to be at each other again the next day.

How far off we are from the days of the Horatii and Curiatii!

This is the state of things to which we are brought by progress, pagan civilization, materialism, and that never satisfied pride which, in the early centuries, already built the tower of Babel.

But if such warfare is not to the honour of our modern soul, may it teach us however the action of a superior force, of an all-powerful hand which plays with our efforts and turns against us, when it pleases Him, the creations of our ambitious folly. That is the lesson of the events under which we have all been bending for long months. May we understand its meaning and profit by it to humiliate us!

### *March 14.*

We have found trench-life again in all its monotonous splendour. The only incidents are the daily bombardments of the villages of Sulzern and Ampferbach; or the more or less prolonged rifle-firing on the Reichakerkopf, where the situation remains rather critical, although to our advantage.

Our activity consists especially in the organization of our positions; but this work has become somewhat tedious since the time it has been always the same, and the men no longer show much taste for it. . . . Among the number, there remain however a few good ones, sharp fellows who have

succeeded in saving their skins since the beginning. Sometimes, when passing another company, I am accosted by a man who, full of joy at seeing again one of the figures of the early days (for they are rare now), reminds me that we marched together on such a day, a long time ago, with the 51st Battalion, or on our first campaign in the Vosges. I shake hands with these old soldiers, whom I do not always recognize, and in the look exchanged between us there is a thought somewhat to this effect: "Hallo, we are then still both of us alive?"

We ourselves—officers and N.C.O.'s—come more or less under the influence of this too uniform life. It is evident that the digging of holes in the earth and the unrolling of barbed wire does not hold out much interest to us. And yet that is our whole duty, the monotonous and inglorious part of which we must forget, seeing only the great cause. The end justifies and ennobles the means.

We have found, on several wounded or dead Germans, small tubes or bottles of ether which, as they are all of the same model, must have been distributed to them in their units, and not sent from home, or bought individually. Many have also bottles of various forms of alcohol in their knapsacks, such as brandy. It is possible, therefore, that the use of these drugs is recommended to them and facilitated. But, at least in my own experience, I have never had before me those disorderly and drunken bands of which the newspapers write. What struck me, however, at the time of their first attacks in February was the in-

difference which some of them showed for the bullets, by coming and risking their lives quite close to our rifles, without appearing to turn a hair, or even to notice the bullets we sent them. I had come to the conclusion that this attitude must be attributed precisely to their inexperience of war, for we have all noted the fact that at first one has not a clear impression of danger.

AT THE OUTPOSTS,  
March 15.

In addition to rifle-firing, the guns have been making a great din of recent days. The Boches are utilizing the commanding positions taken from us to paralyse by a shower of shells the unfortunate villages below—Sulzern and especially Ampferbach and its hamlets. Notwithstanding this systematic bombardment, almost all the inhabitants have remained, and take refuge in their cellars the whole day. I wonder why the civilian population of these villages, with nothing to do so near the enemy, has not long since been removed to the rear. . . . But, ever since then, why not have evacuated *à priori* all the inhabitants? To think (which is really a little bit *too* stiff) that there lies before us, between the lines and still inhabited, an entire hamlet of six to eight families!

A young officer of the 12th related to me that the *chasseurs* frequented, in the village of Metzeral, a certain woman, whose movements, shortly before the German attacks, appeared suspicious, and on whom was found at that time a notebook, in which

was set down, next to the days for appointments with German N.C.O.'s, all sorts of information concerning our troops, the battalions and their numbers, the age and appearance of the *chasseurs*, and I know not what besides. This woman was arrested by us. How much similar traffic is carried on unknown! This is another of the sorry sides of war and one of the most repulsive.

NEAR SULZERN,  
*March 21.*

A beautiful spring day with a clear sky and a generous sun, which, whilst warming us, makes the last remnants of snow lingering on the slopes sparkle.

We are still at the same spot, on this rocky crest that the sun lights up at an early hour of the morning and on which its languorous rays gleam at twilight. The days are warm. On the still withered and yellow grass, between the greyish rocks dappled with lichens, the *chasseurs* saunter and bathe in this soft light, which quickens their blood, made sluggish by the long winter.

A violent engagement, foreshadowed by an intense bombardment, took place yesterday on the Reichakerkopf. The Germans, who had received important reinforcements, energetically attacked the position, with the support of a considerable number of guns. The fight—extremely violent—began about 3 p.m., and lasted until about six. We could follow the action from our positions by seeing the continual bursting of Boche shells, to which, alas! ours hardly replied. What a hellish

uproar! As to the result—alas! I believe that since yesterday evening the Reichakerkopf is no longer in our possession. This morning our batteries were peppering its summit and outskirts, proving that we are no longer there. When the Boches want to do anything, they are not easily deterred, no matter what price they may be called upon to pay. But really we do not receive sufficient aid here from the artillery. One would think that we lack munitions.

AT THE OUTPOSTS OF SULZERN,  
*March 23.*

Another surprise this morning. About nine o'clock I received an order to be ready to march about ten, without any other indication.

It appeared that an attempt was to be made to recapture the Reichakerkopf. But, in reality, our part, a very secondary one, was limited to neutralizing and distracting the German lines by intense volleys, whilst the offensive was being pushed forward up there. The Boches replied to our rifle-fire by peppering us with shells, which did us no harm.

As to the main action on the Reichakerkopf, I do not know what the result has been. Our artillery prepared the attack a fairly long time with 120's, 75's and 65's. The infantry then began its movement, indicated by rifle-firing, but everything calmed down fairly soon. I am still under the impression that there is nothing changed up there. That big spur, crowned with pines, is becoming one of

those points of the front the mention of which frequently recurs.

The Reichakerkopf will soon be known everywhere, at least by name, just as the Bois de la Grurie, the Bois de Bolande, or Bois du Prêtre in Argonne became known; or again the Hartmannsweilerkopf, a little lower down towards Thaun. Henceforth, all these names will evoke repeated engagements: bloody alternations of advance and retreat; and it seems sad and curious that, on both sides, such sacrifices should be made for the possession of a few hundred yards—or even less—of territory. The reason is that certain points are sufficiently important to justify such efforts; and sometimes a gain of fifty or twenty-five metres is more advantageous than kilometres taken at other points.

The Reichakerkopf, for the possession of which the Boches and ourselves are fiercely disputing, is a case in point. The importance of the position is due to the fact that it dominates and absolutely commands Munster and the whole valley of the Fecht.

### *March 25.*

We are advancing towards fine weather. Birds are burgeoning on every branch; the meadows, through which rivulets trickle to the bottom of the valleys, are gradually assuming the verdancy of young grass; and the first flowers are opening timidly. Soon, the birds will be singing, and those great sinister flocks of crows, which disport in the hollows, will rise again towards the heights.

Amidst this revival of life, our days remain calm. On the Reichakerkopf we have heard nothing more since the little counter-attack of the day before yesterday. Throughout the night rockets go up from one side or the other, illuminating the whole mountain. Obviously, neither the Germans nor ourselves are thinking for the moment of a serious offensive. We must beware of imagining that our enemies are at an end of their resources and means; but neither must we lament over the long duration of the war and the inferiority of the present troops, compared to what they were at the beginning. People in France have always had a regrettable tendency to prognosticate, to discuss, and to indulge, without discernment, in endless consideration.

Above all, we are all far too critical. One of the great differences between the Boche soldier and the Frenchman is that the former carries out orders with passive obedience, whilst the latter first of all comments upon them. This is the inconvenience of that quickness of mind which hardly exists with the German. A Frenchman is essentially a critical being. Already at Feldkirch, I recollect having often met with this difference between the French pupil, who understood quickly, passed judgment on everything and everybody at the first glance, with more or less accuracy, chaffed on every occasion, and the German pupil, slow and dull-witted, who understood with difficulty, or not at all, but who never gave up trying. How different the two races are!

The Boches fight out of pride, the English through interest, and we for honour. That is perhaps not

very profitable to us, but all the same it is not lacking in savour. France has not finished producing Cyranos who will fight "pour le panache."

NEAR SULZERN,

*March 31, Wednesday before Good Friday.*

The leisure of these long days of inaction leads us to reflect beyond our duties of the moment, and this is blameable. Duty is the acceptation of the lot which falls to us. Nothing is either vulgar or mediocre when viewed from a sufficient height, and above all our days the ideal ought to soar.

For some, this ideal is patriotism, more or less enlightened; for others, it is Christian charity, which teaches us disinterestedness; for many, it is the vague and profound notion of good to be accomplished. The most numerous consciences are those which conceive beauty and the necessity of duty confusedly. And I imagine that God must take their effort, even unreasoned, towards light and truth into great account. For it is not necessary to enunciate one's duty to carry it out, and those who accomplish it have no need to specify it in formulas.

IN THE TRENCHES NEAR SULZERN,  
*April 2, Good Friday.*

Good Friday! What reflections, recollections, and reasons for indulging in hope this festival brings to our mind—this sad and appeasing anniversary of the mightiest event the world has ever known!

It is a glorious spring morning. The somewhat

cloudy sky is of a tender blue, and the softened outlines of the still wholly white mountains form a marvellous picture on the horizon. Gradually, in the already warm rays of the sun, the recently fallen snow is melting, revealing between the patches left here and there the rich and vigorous new grass. The air is still. A gentle breeze from the north brings the fresh breath of the heights, making the first fragrance of spring seem more exquisite. How resplendent the Alps over there must be!

We are within sight of the end of winter. From time to time we shall have days like this. They will help us to look more confidently towards the future and to entertain the hope of an early deliverance. The whole of France, nay, of Europe, awaits the hour of resurrection and aspires, like this still enchainèd Nature, to break its bounds and enter on the new life. We have done with the winter of patient and simply confident waiting, and are now within reach of early realizations, or of preparation for a certainty long since foreseen. But perhaps we are again showing a little—impatience? It has so often been said that in the spring the war would turn to our advantage; we have concentrated so many restrained hopes on the weeks and months to which we are coming that this general feeling is perhaps rather that of the child to whom a cake has been promised if he is good, and who comes, the period having elapsed without him failing, to claim the promised reward.

It matters little, however. Confidence and hope are now for everybody not only the wisest but also

the only possible attitude. We have everything to gain thereby; otherwise, we should have everything to lose. But to us and many others this Good Friday brings still many graver reasons for confident resignation, and less than ever is it the time to give way to human considerations. They would seem, on such a day, so vain, nay, so criminal.

A man of my company has just been wounded in the side by a bullet, as he was passing along a trench commanded by the crest which the Germans occupy opposite us. He is seriously hurt. I have just been to see and bandage him. The stretcher-bearers will come this evening and carry him away under cover of the night, but I know not whether he will be able to pull through. But what a day on which to die! He is a very decent fellow, one of those, now becoming more and more rare, who have been on campaign since the beginning. Just now, whilst I was dressing his wound, and although he was in great pain, he insisted on returning to one of his comrades twenty-two *sous* (11d.) he had borrowed yesterday.

The position we have occupied for the past few days, for the second time, and which is still insufficiently consolidated, has the disadvantage of being completely commanded by that of the enemy, who holds the outskirts of a wood and a higher crest. Day and night the bullets beat down upon our trenches from above, and we can hardly reply, as we see only the parapets and narrow armoured loopholes of the enemy's trenches. During recent nights, with the snow and moonlight, which make us almost as visible as in daylight, I had one man

killed and three others wounded, including two N.C.O.'s.

*April 3.*

A few words only on this Easter eve.

We shall shortly be relieved and go to the Col de Bischstein, where we spend to-morrow. I trust that the Boches will leave us in peace on that fête day. But they are so stupid.

*Au revoir! A joyful Easter to you!*

*Easter day, April 4.*

So it is amidst these pine woods, where the snow still lingers, that we are spending this festival of Easter! What recollections and images, vague desires and confused hopes this festival, ordinarily so cheerful and spring-like, awakens! I call to mind the enthusiastic walks we made last year with Jean during the short vacation at our disposal. I can see once more, with minute clearness of detail, those landscapes of the Chartreuse which we traversed with alert footstep, filling our lungs with that mountain air whose rude caress sent our blood coursing through our veins—the air of the Dent de Crolles, the Charvet peak, the Granier, the old Casque de Néron, and of that ridge of the Rochers de Chalves to which we took our friends, the Delormes, one of whom has disappeared.

What dear recollections! I, too, shall find a difficulty, if I see once more those summits we

climbed together, in accustoming myself to the idea that we shall never more set out on those mountain excursions of which we were so fond, which we so heartily agreed to undertake and enjoy together. Very often, without fixing my thoughts on the subject, I have had a feeling that the void left by his irremediable departure will not be wholly perceptible to me until the day when, God willing, I return to the spot where my memory meets him again.

Consequently, so long as the war lasts, I shall be absorbed by the present, sufficiently to prevent me descending to the depths of regret. Moreover, it is better so, and I strive to make it so.

It is later, when I shall meet you all again yonder, in the midst of everything he loved and of everybody who saw him alive, that I shall experience the full weight of his absence. Henceforth he is in perfect happiness. The suffering ones are those who remain when the others have left.

So it is amidst this pine forest we are to-day celebrating Easter. We have no church, not even houses, since we inhabit, among the trees, more or less subterranean shelters, fitted up with the limited resources of the place. Nevertheless, a chaplain of the division arrived this morning to say a mass almost in the open air, under a little wooden shelter, in front of which the crowd of infantry stood bareheaded in the drizzle. But, in spite of the grey sky and fog, there was an air of meditation and fervour about this improvised mass, without either bells or candles, which in no way approached sadness. I hope that, tomorrow, we shall have a similar mass at which we

can receive our Easter sacrament. This reminds me of a poem by Botrel, in reply to the destroyers of crucifixes who raged in France a few years ago, and in which the Breton poet said that, if nothing remains standing of what we erected for our religion, if our churches, houses, calvaries and crosses are overthrown, "we will pray before the blue sky." That is our position here; only the sky is not always blue.

The day has passed off very quietly. Our guns, which are generally rather silent, have thundered the whole day. At this moment, doubtless in reply, a few big shells are falling near here, and the noise of their bursting resounds again and again among the pines. An exchange of Easter eggs.

COL DE BISCHSTEIN,  
*Monday, April 5.*

Still the same pouring and lowering sky, the same fogs depositing moisture in the form of a fine and imperceptible rain. Nevertheless, this evening the sky cleared, and we had a pretty sunset on the heights. From the neighbouring observatory, whither I had ascended with De Landouzy, we gazed upon the valley which descend, by way of Stosswihr and Munster, towards Colmar, whilst growing broader between the slopes, dotted with pines. It is truly a beautiful country when you can look upon it thus, without being under the imminent threat of bullets or shells; and when you can momentarily set aside everything which will eternally make it appear to us to be unpleasant and cruel, as though this impassibly

beautiful nature was responsible for all the blood it has seen flow.

This morning, in the mud and rain, I descended to the Elrmatt camp, quite near here, where the chaplain was saying a mass for the companies of the 62nd Battalion which have taken up their residence in the woods. I am able to confess at the foot of a pine tree and communicate at that chance altar, protected after a fashion by a sheet-iron roof. Amidst these wild surroundings, free from all unimportant display, it seemed as though one were nearer God. I prayed for all of you, for those dear to me, and for the many known or unknown friends who are assisting me by their prayers.

To-morrow morning the general of division is coming here to decorate Major Foret and a captain of mountain artillery. Great commotion!—trimming ourselves up, review, and the band. The 6th will be there to do the honours.

AT THE OUTPOSTS OF BISCHSTEIN,  
*April 9.*

What water! What water! Above and below, in the air and on the ground, everywhere, in fact, there is water, and it is still falling. At the present time there is a veritable tempest of snow and rain, and thunder, which we have not heard for many months, has just crashed in the sky. How that rumbling, coming from unexplored heights and descending with the roar of an avalanche, seems almost sweet and agreeable compared to the brutal and stupid noise of

the guns! Our music and clatter are very mediocre imitations.

It was through oceans of mud and in pitch darkness that we came down last night from the woods of Bischstein to relieve a company at the outposts. Bad weather, and all we include in that term, is one of the greatest enemies of the soldier on campaign. As far as I was concerned, I escaped with wet feet and mud-stained clothes; but I am thinking of my men who are unable to leave the trench, and who must now be huddled under their canvas tents, whilst, stoically, they wait for the downpour to cease. . . .

Thus we approach the spring—that spring so patiently and ardently expected as the dawn of better days. What is happening? What is going to happen? The newspapers give the vague impression of something hatching—something coming to maturity in silence after a laborious gestation.

We must not place our hopes in a *coup de théâtre*; nor must we fix a time within which these hopes are to be realized; but we must have confidence in that future concerning which nobody, I believe, possesses veritable data. It is certain, however, that Joffre and his advisers have not remained the whole winter without elaborating plans. But it is still more certain that the “good God”—He who is the God of every one—has also long since decided on His projects, and that these will certainly be realized, whatever may happen to those of the generals. So, let us wait with confidence and joy. I still believe, without letting my mind dwell too much on the matter, that the solution will come in an unexpected

manner and at an unanticipated time. Our joy will be only the greater.

Anyway, everything passes away; and the most important and most serious fact in life is that it must come to an end. How? when? and after what events? That is of small importance.

*April 12.*

A blue sky at last! We have been asking ourselves for the past week whether we should survive this deluge. The summits towering above us—snow-covered balloons or broad wooded declivities—compose a huge natural amphitheatre in which the light, in this fine weather, plays in a marvellous manner, especially towards evening, when the sun disappears behind the horizon, which is hidden, quite near us, by the mighty summit of the Bischstein. Things stand out in relief on the opposite slopes, and the oblique rays of light, already half-veiled, cast on the meadows silhouettes which stretch out as though on multitudinous sun-dials.

*April 13.*

Whatever people may have said about the Alsatians, those we meet here are very hospitable and sympathetic. One must make allowance for things. I am well aware that many have gone over to Germany, and that there has been and will continue to be more espionage here than everywhere else; but the inhabitants with whom we have to do, and who are especially women, children and

old people, are honest folk to whom the war appears above all as a misfortune, in the presence of which everybody ought to help each other. Little suspicion, moreover, can rest on those whose guests we are, since the grandfather and grandmother are French. I believe that examined thus in detail, the majority of the homes of Germany would appear to us, almost everywhere, very little inclined to war. German women are, in general, good housewives, docile and laborious; and we must distinguish between the military façade raised by Prussia, with its arrogant and foppish Junkers, and the people who, if they were not militarized and hypnotized by this powerful caste of the nobility, would be a nation of quiet artisans and ordinary middle-class folk.

What astonishes me is that a war like this, which brings such armies into the field and keeps the greatest Powers on the alert, has been able to continue until now without any interior event interrupting its progress. *À priori*, it would appear that of all these great Powers, one or another, if war were continued a long time, would witness the appearance of such economic or political difficulties as would decide the fate of the armies. And yet for more than eight months the whole of Europe has been panting and supports without accident the immense effort that the present war represents. How is it that none of the belligerent countries have been troubled by interior events? Which will be the first among them to be affected by disunion, party struggles, revolt, wear and tear—by everything one can vaguely fear without seeing it

clearly, and which, one day or another, may overthrow the whole of this at once formidable and fragile structure? What questions arise when one reflects . . .

The Prussian Guard, of whose presence in Alsace we had been informed, is indeed here, since prisoners belonging to a battalion of the infantry of the Guard have been taken at Hartman. But it appears to be more to the south, and it was perhaps in order to attempt to retake this famous summit that it was brought here. However, if it is to come to our district, let it do so. We shall be glad to make its acquaintance.

*April 18.*

It is Sunday, I believe. Since we have been living far from the civilized world I can no longer remember the day of the week and the date. All the days are alike. And what is there on this rocky crest, on which we are the only and certainly the first inhabitants, to make a difference between them? The neighbouring villages at the bottom of the valley are silent, being partly destroyed. Their church bells or the chimes of their clocks have long since ceased to ring. The only sounds which break the silence of nature are the rumbling of the guns and the sharp crack of rifles.

They 'phoned a piece of good news to me this morning: the adjutant of my company, whom I had proposed for the military medal, has been decorated. He is a gallant Savoyard who, at the beginning of the war, was a sergeant in the 22nd

Alpine Battalion. At the famous engagement of Mandray, on September 2, when the whole of this battalion, thrice in succession, charged the German lines, he assumed the command of his platoon, whose two chiefs had been killed, led it to the attack, was wounded by three bullets and a bayonet thrust and, with his four gaping wounds, remained for thirty-six hours on the battle-field before he was picked up. Hardly cured, he joined the 11th Battalion in December, just before the Carenay affair.

This morning, as soon as I had received the news by telephone, I ascended to the part of the line occupied by his section, drew them up in two ranks behind the trench, and made them present arms in order to announce the good news to him and congratulate him before his men—and before the Boches. If I had been told in advance, I should have endeavored to have had for to-day a few bottles to uncork, for everybody knows that a true Savoyard expects to touch glasses on great occasions. But, in default of this *canon* (glass), we had others which were roaring behind us; and as to touching glasses, we have still time to do that before the end of the war.

I assure you that I am not to be pitied. Every one, at this time, fights in his own way, and according to his own position. Our part is still the least disagreeable and most enviable, but also the least meritorious. What appears to be redoubtable in the profession of arms is danger, because everybody commits the error of attaching great value to a few years of life more or less, and because, knowing

only this world, we love it, in spite of everything. If we could have for but a second the exact vision of what awaits us at the other side of the grave, who knows whether we should not desire it with all our soul? But we have no need to make ourselves uneasy over the hour; it will come at the behest of Providence. Whether it is to-morrow or in a hundred years, let us always reserve for it a hearty welcome.

Strange idea of mine to touch on such a subject when everything around celebrates life, when the meadows put forth flowers in the generous spring-time sun, and the birds sing and make merry in the branches.

*April 25.*

Still another Sunday spent without anything distinguishing this day from any other. Whilst in this valley, where everything rejoices at the rising of the sap, we spend a warm, quiet day, the continuous rumbling which comes from the other side of the neighbouring mountains tells us that the battle over there still continues, and that the action must be a hot one. It is probable that the engagements whose echoes reach us are taking place around the Hartmannsweilerkopf.

You doubtless know that the detachment of the army of the Vosges, to which we belong, ceased to exist when its leader, General Putz, left the district. Since then we are attached to the VIIth Army, commanded by a man whom the war has brought into

great prominence, General de Maud'huy, who was a mere brigadier-general at the beginning of the campaign. He was formerly one of the mountain infantry, and did not fail to tell us so in the Artois, when we saw him one day on our way from Mingoval to Saint-Eloi. At all events, he is a very active man, and I do not think you can reproach either him or our new divisionary general, de Pouydraguin, with being sparing with shells.

For it is certain that since these two soldiers took command our artillery has suddenly become loquacious.

Three days ago we witnessed a very sad spectacle here: the departure of the country people, all of whom are being sent to the rear. Poor old folk with reddened eyes and heavy hearts went on their way, abandoning everything they had known and loved for years, and leading by the hand little children, in their Sunday best, whose almost joyful unconcern (children rejoice over so little!) contrasted painfully with the resigned grief of their mothers and grandparents. Really, these people—those at least who entertained us so generously—were very sympathetic and estimable. The young wife, whose husband, serving in the German army, long since disappeared, awakened profound pity. Poor folk! . . . They gave us everything they could not carry away with them: wine, various provisions, cattle, etc., and have left their home, with all its furniture, under our care. But they have very little hope of seeing it all again.

*April 28.*

The weather is magnificent. The meadows are an intense green, the sun is warm, and the leaves are beginning to unfold. Long live the spring!

This evening we are leaving our trenches and ascending in the night to the Col de Bischstein.

To-day has been quiet, but the bullets descending from the Boche trenches furiously impinge on our parapets. Yesterday evening I had another man killed on the spot by a bullet through his head. They aim well in this clear weather. The nights are splendid, bathed in moonlight and already almost warm.

*April 30.*

The days are long, the air is mild, and the pine trees of Bischstein, which we knew when they were snowy and inhospitable, have become a charming rustic abode. What a change since that moonless night, agitated by the din of unsatiated struggles, in the midst of the snowbound woods, and without either shelter or roof! To-day a veritable little Sylvan city animates this once wild forest, where the roebucks passed fearlessly over the virgin moss. Shelters of all sorts and sizes are here for those who come from below, after a more or less long sojourn in the land of trenches.

Here we no longer feel that continual mental strain of trench life, that feeling of ever-threatening danger, that attenuated but ever-existing impression that the eye of an enemy is watching, ready

to send from afar the bullet which surprises and sometimes kills.

We rest at night without troubling about keeping watch around the hole which shelters us; and if the men dig and excavate, it is of their own free will, without having to be on their guard against the quite near German. Real little houses have been constructed and differ in only one respect from civilized habitations, inasmuch as they are *under* instead of being *above* the ground. The major's dugout is a masterpiece: a rectangular hut protected by a blindage, two metres thick, of pine-tree trunks, alternating with earth and stones. Inside, a wainscoted interior with a wooden floor, a bed with real sheets, a table, chairs, mirror, etc. There is nothing missing, unless it is a piano. The entrance is ornamented with a real little garden, enclosed within railings, and the attraction of which is a large hunting horn, designed with mosses and bearing the No. 11 in its circle. There are other shelters for the doctors, sappers, *agents de liaison*, stretcher-bearers, warehouses, provision stores, office, etc. A fancy dining-room for fine days has been arranged on the outskirts of the forest, with a broad glazed window through which we can see the Honeck and the Altenberg—a dining-room we inaugurated this morning by lunching there with the major. Finally, a little chapel is in course of construction, "Our Lady of the Pines," which will advantageously replace the sorry shelter under which the Easter mass was celebrated. In brief, it is a complete camp, the architecture of which has been influenced by the necessity to protect ourselves

at one and the same time against the cold, the rain, and the shells, and the construction of which does honour to the ingenuity of the improvised contractors.

*May 4.*

I resume my letter interrupted yesterday. This time I no longer write to you from the pine woods of Bischstein, but from the "Villa Carency," which is the post of command on Hill . . . It is a shelter similar to all those which this war of foxes has taught us to construct: a large excavation in the ground, covered with a blindage, one to two metres thick, made of alternative layers of billets and earth. Slightly to the rear, you come to the terrace: a delightful corner, hidden amidst the apple trees in blossom, where we have placed a table and two benches. The spot is absolutely sheltered from the annoying gaze of the Boches, and from it one can admire the whole amphitheatre of heights that enclose the valley.

At the present time this Alsatian valley is exquisite. All the meadows in the hollow are green, the orchards in flower; and on every branch little tender leaves tremble, eager for the sun. Water flows from all sides towards the bottom of the valley, and the soft murmurs of these innumerable rivulets combine and form a never-tiring lullaby. From all this, from the snowy cherry trees, the thickets full of birds, and the flower-covered fields, arise a secret and irresistible sweetness—that fragrance of the spring we are familiar with every year

and whose voluptuous caress, every year, we feel.

How petty and ridiculous we must be when our power of destruction and devastating genius leaves our sensibility intact in the presence of this life that we are eager to overthrow and that Nature, intangible and disdainful of our efforts, sets up against us. War? Is it anything else than those comical children's disputes at which we laugh, knowing full well that they are ephemeral and without importance? Men are big children and their conflicts are, in the main, similar; they differ only in degree. It is useful, in fact, to estimate and to judge: in all this we are but playthings and know not how to control ourselves. Let us confidently entrust ourselves to the hand that leads us; for war, even the most formidable, is but a very small game for Him who causes the spring to bloom again.

The philosophers of pagan antiquity were perhaps nearer God than we are, for already they preached self-contempt and confidence in that divinity which they divined before they knew it, and whose infinite goodness they foresaw. How many, even to-day, are there not of these uneasy souls, thirsting for the absolute, who seek God without knowing it and sometimes without wishing to recognize Him? They walk by the side of the truth all their lives; they have a vague perception of it—desire it; they are enlightened by the reflection of the fire close at hand, which they could meet face to face if they would but take a step. Who then stops them? What barrier separates them from the true light? . . . Pride, weakness, blindness?—how can I tell! We are all weaklings

and seekers in the beyond. Jesus Christ might say to each of us from His Cross, as He said to Pascal: "You would not seek Me if you had not already found Me."

Therefore, what matter this crashing of shells around us ever since morning? What matter these bullets which come from the outskirts of the woods overlooking us and flatten with a sharp smack above our heads? These are but a few of the means that He who gave us life may employ to deprive us of it.

At Bischstein, on Sunday, we had a pretty open-air mass, in magnificent weather. They are building among the pines a little wooden chapel: "Our Lady of the Pines." Mass was said by a priest stretcher-bearer of the 11th Battalion. During mass there were hymns, psalms, and a very fine sermon by the chaplain of the division, a very sympathetic young priest of the diocese of Saint-Dié, who comes right into the trenches to distribute medals and cigarettes.

### *May 10.*

I received yesterday evening your letter announcing the departure of my brother Joseph for the front. So he, too, in his turn, has joined in in the dance! For him it is but a painful separation: notwithstanding all his courage and determination to master himself, he has had, and will again have to feel the sting of isolation, to suffer that anguish of heart we experience on leaving behind us all our affections, in order to cast ourselves into the un-

known. But when the hour of action comes—the hour when, without even thinking of it, you are caught up by the whirlwind—then, like the others, like his elders, he will be governed by the great duty of the moment; and in that straining of his whole being towards that simple and unique goal, sacrifice will become easy and spontaneous to him. It is not those who leave who are to be pitied, but those who, watching them go away, remain behind.

But God is good. If He still demands your anguish, as an offering, to be added henceforth to your trials, He will not refuse you the secret gift of that grace which bestows strength, confidence and peace on all. It is that profound peace, promised by Himself to the willing souls of this world, one must desire and seek above all, and I shall not cease to plead to Him for you.

I have just experienced one of the most pleasant emotions of this war, the usual features of which are brutality and violence. You doubtless know of the important success our troops have gained near Arras. It was communicated to us this morning by a telegram and a little note from the colonel, asking us to sing this evening, at 7.30, along the whole front of the brigade, the *Marseillaise* and the *Sidi-Brahim*. Was it not right that the Boches, who do not fail to ring all the bells of Munster for each of their real or imaginary successes, should also hear us in our turn celebrating a victory? So we prepared to sing at the above-named hour.

About seven o'clock, before night had quite closed in, rockets began to go up from all points of

the line. From the outskirts of the village at the bottom of the valley, from the trenches suspended half-way up the slope, from the bare crests or wooded heights of all the corners of this Alsatian valley where Alpine soldiers shelter, we could see rising, in long trails of light, the interwoven parabolas, ending in as many sparkling globes which, while turning round and round, slowly descended. This was the signal. A few minutes afterwards every voice began to sing those war songs the national anthem and the *Sidi-Brahim*. The execution was not impeccable. But what an impression we received on hearing those alert rhythms coming from the earth or falling from the heavens, and echoing down the ravine! The Boches gave no sign of life; they must have been listening and wondering what such a concert meant.

But this concert had hardly begun when the bells of the ruined villages—those bells which had been silent for more than two months—began themselves to ring, mingling their joyful notes with ours. This time the Boches were not at all pleased. Doubtless irritated by still hearing the bells ringing in those poor steeples which they thought they had for ever reduced to silence, they opened on the villages an artillery fire which continues even now. A storm of shells is falling. If the steeples, shattered so many times already, are still standing to-morrow, it will be because they will never fall. At all events, if some steeple or other has received the *coup de grâce* to-night, the bells it shelters will have executed a fine swan-song. We ourselves were not spared. The Boches, to prove to us that they had clearly

heard, sent in three volleys of shrapnel. Nobody was hit.

The programme did not end there. About nine o'clock the band, having ascended for the occasion on to that big spur we call the rocky crest, which overlooks the ravine, struck up. It first of all played the *Marseillaise*, then the *Sidi-Brahim*, and after that the *Protestation*. Finally the buglers sounded the thirty-one refrains of the battalions, concluding with a furious charge, which everybody accompanied by shouting at the top of his voice. This time; if the Boches do not think that Italy has declared war, or that the Russians are before the walls of Budapest, there's nothing more to be done than to hand in one's resignation. In any case, this will still prove to them that our moral is not so bad. It is not the last time they will find that out!

Surrounded by so much desolation, so many ruins and tears, the recollection of that spring night will stand out in my memory as a golden moment. And of all the incidents in this war which I shall later find pleasure in recalling, if I survive it, nothing perhaps will have retained more fragrance and more charm than that night sown with stars and filled with the music of the bells and the band.

### May 11.

We have had exceedingly fine weather for the end of our stay on this hill . . . which we are leaving in the night. We have never remained anywhere (neither in the Somme, nor in Belgium, nor in

Artois) so long as here, where we came on February 19. The beginning was hard because of the engagements, the snow, the cold, lack of shelters, food difficulties. But gradually all that improved. The German attacks calmed down; the cold, more tenacious, also ended by giving way; we established ourselves by constructing shelters and digging holes; we adapted ourselves to this life. Then the civilian population was evacuated and we came in for their houses. We even acquired, before their departure, a number of animals they were unable to take away with them. At one time, the 6th Company found itself in possession of two asses, three goats and three calves. The last-named were eaten at the mess, for which I bought them. (Who would have thought that one day I should deal in cattle!) The dogs follow us in our comings and goings. Of the two asses, one is reserved for the kitchen department, transporting the cauldrons and miscellaneous kitchen utensils which follow us in our movements from place to place; the other is the exclusive property of the officers, and is completed by an unspeakable little cart on which our canteens are removed. Finally, the two goats are also our own property and provide us with milk, for we hardly drink anything else at our meals.

As you see, the company has gone in for a regular little menagerie, and if the war lasts still longer, leading us towards new resources, I ask myself whether the battalion will not become a sort of nomadic tribe, similar to those which wandered about the world in prehistoric times.

This evening, since we are ascending into the

woods, the camp will begin to move a little before the company, which progresses more slowly, and which must not be encumbered by a retinue whose appearance is evidently not very military. The asses, carts, stew-pots, barrels, goats, dogs, etc., will decamp under the guidance of the cooks and orderlies, transporting our household gods to other scenes. And every four days it is all brought back.

One gets accustomed to everything, even to war. We even end by sometimes completely forgetting the Boches, notwithstanding the few shells which explode here and there, or the bullets which at times whistle by. These noises end by becoming as familiar as those of trams in the town, or torrents in the mountains, and so long as their intensity does not exceed the customary dose, we no longer pay great attention. That is the reason why in time, here as elsewhere, we watch the leaves and meadows turn green, and admire a pretty landscape or a beautiful sunset, because we become insensible to the man-made ugliness of war, but not to the beauties of the world which God created.

If ever I return among you, I shall watch the summits of Belledone grow roseate, on beautiful Dauphiny evenings, with the same heartfelt admiration; with the same fervour I shall go, on days of freedom, to breathe the intoxicating air of the heights and to gather the simple flowers whose perfume is distilled by the mountain; and nothing of all this that I have known and loved, and that, notwithstanding the melancholy of the void created since, I shall find again the same, will seem to me to be changed. How eagerly Jean and I tasted the joys of that moun-

tain on which we loved so much to wander together! Henceforth all that forms part of my recollections. And when once more I visit those summits we climbed together so cheerfully, it will be less to seek there the voluptuous charm of emotions yet unknown than to find there again, as on a pilgrimage, the indelible trace of his passage.

*May 15.*

For the past four days we have been in the woods, on the slopes which descend, from the high barrier which separates us from France, towards the bottom of the valley where the first villages are—Sulzern and Stosswihr, now a mass of ruins and deserted homes. We inhabit the Mulwen-Wald, a broad rectangular patch of pine trees growing on the slope sheltered by a secondary valley. These woods, thus perched on rocky, grassy slopes, are characteristic of this region, and I have never seen anything similar in our Alps: immense expanses of meadow-land, which is almost everywhere uncultivated and strewn with stones, apart from the areas enclosed by low walls close to the houses, and which, with their thick green grass, abounding with flowers, contrast with the greyness of the whole. The entire watershed of the Vosges, looking towards the Rhine, is thus made up of woods and pasture-lands, which share the sides of the hills or the rounded knolls on the mountain ridges.

*May 25.*

Even on the most uneventful days, our time is eaten up by a multitude of petty occupations, and it is difficult to find a few hours which are not interrupted by some necessity or other connected with our duties. Stripes, especially in war time, bestow more duties than privileges; and those wearing them have received them, not for themselves, but for others.

For my part, I would willingly have yielded the excessive honours heaped upon me to others, not only on account of my own taste, which would have been too poor a reason, but because of bare equity; for it would not have been difficult to find others worthier and more able than myself. What happened did not depend on myself. And since God has permitted me to occupy this post, I must do my best to fulfil my task. I, by my own means, do not suffice, I count on God granting me the necessary help to do what He demands. I know that I can count on your prayers.

However, I must admit that command has been less heavy to bear than I feared it would be. I have never regarded myself, and do not even to-day regard myself as born to command. But that is not the point. What we are able to do, that of which each of us may be the author, does not merely depend on the instrument he is himself, but especially on the hand which handles it. And very often, when the work is completed and the instrument at rest, we would refuse to believe that it could have been handled in that manner.

What I can say to you, at any rate, is that, if I return from this war, I shall have no difficulty whatever in feeling in my element among you and in resuming the course of the life I led before this one.

This evening we leave the woods of Bischstein and our shelters among the pines, and go and relieve a company at Eck, on that immense brow whose base, encompassed on the east by the Sulzern River, the Kleinthal, and on the south by the Fecht of Ampferbach, vanishes from the sight of the temple and the first houses of Stosswihr.

Meanwhile, Joseph is getting acquainted with trench life and is gradually becoming a *poilu*. I am sure that he will quickly grow accustomed to this existence, so new to him, notwithstanding all there is in it contrary to his tastes and character.

#### *May 26.*

Beautiful weather, a summer sun, tall grass abounding with flowers, concerts among the birds in the branches, swarms of flies among the rubbish of the houses destroyed by shells. Here and there a few rifle-shots, a few shells little to be dreaded. We are watching each other and waiting.

#### *May 27.*

For the past two days we have been at the outposts of Eck, a small hamlet the houses of which are placed in rows one above the other on the slope of an enormous brow which descends from the wooded spur of Bischstein to Stosswihr. Here we tower over the valley, where, spread out, are first of all

the picturesque houses of Stosswihr and then, a little farther off, those of Munster, whose two brick steeples rise above gables. Influenced by a consideration that the Boches cannot perhaps understand, our artillerymen avoid as much as possible the bombardment of Munster, which spreads out there, so near us, under our eyes and to our very feet, and where life seems to have hardly suffered through the war. The pointed roofs of the little light-coloured houses with green shutters smoke each day tranquilly. The hours strike in the massive clock-tower of the cathedral without our guns (so overwhelming when they desire to be so) becoming irritated at this life, which they respect loyally. Munster has quite the stamp of the little Alsatian towns of the Black Forest or of Hary. The houses there are small, low and unobtrusive under their big grey roofs; the streets are narrow and sinuous; and one sees few large buildings but many chalets, which are scattered about on the circumference of the town, and the gables or only the weathercocks of which emerge from the thick clumps of trees amidst which they are hidden.

ECK,  
*May 28.*

This time I write to you, not under the burning-hot sun of the last few days, but amidst fog and rain. From the top of the house which shelters me, from the artillery observatory installed in the roof, you can to-day no longer see either the steeples on

the chalets of Munster. Only the flowery meadows which descend and are lost in the sad fog are visible; and the only frame is that of the immediate surroundings, with their groups of burnt or ruined houses. How pleasant and cheerful this little district must have been before the war!

But war came. Eck has become, like all these hamlets of Alsace, a heap of ruins, a place of desolation and solitude, a charnel-house and a tomb. One day the peasants who had remained rooted to their homes were surprised by an avalanche of German shells, as the peaceful inhabitants of Pompeii were in former days by the ashes of Mount Vesuvius. One by one the houses were aimed at and hit. Some burnt on receiving the first shells; others resisted longer and only fell after several bombardments; a few remained standing, with only gashes and holes in their walls or roofs. Those who escaped death fled, leaving all their possessions behind them; several were burnt alive, or buried under the ruins. Cattle were killed in the stables. It is a long time now since the Germans fired on Eck; they could take aim at nothing save dilapidated walls or pierced and tottering roofs.

I inhabit one of the least damaged of these houses. Three or four shells fell on its roof, but many tiles are still intact. I am installed on the ground-floor, in a room which we have had cleaned as well as possible, but where there remains a prodigious number of black-beetles which run at full speed and in all directions on the floor. The house possesses a good vaulted cellar, where the telephone is fixed up, and where we can take refuge in case of a

bombardment. The *agents de liaison* occupy a neighbouring cellar. The two companies which hold this sector are a little lower down, in trenches suspended on the slopes which directly command Stosswihr.

This sector, which we occupy for the first time, is a dismal one, doubtless because of the desolation surrounding us; but in France good humour is ever uppermost. As the Boches, notwithstanding all the shells they have expended on this single village, have not killed everything, flowers continue to open in the gardens and lilac bushes shed their perfume around crumbling calcined walls.

Perpetual preparations on all sides here. New guns are placed in position daily. The organizations we are preparing are certainly with a view to an important offensive.

The world's events appear more and more incomprehensible to us. Whither are we going? Nobody, I firmly believe, can say. What is certain, is that for each of us life, whatever may be the disadvantages and adventures which fill it, will end in death. Sooner or later, what matter! And what signify also the most treacherous things of this world, since the world will pass away and passes away each day.

Amidst the emotions or perils of a battle-field, or else in the simplicity of humble home duties, our lifetime ebbs away drop by drop . . . and each of these drops of time, like the labourer's field in the fable, conceals a treasure. We are wrong in perpetually setting our hearts on something. Wisdom, which consists in being content with our lot,

seems so simple, so easy. It is nothing and it is everything.

BISCHSTEIN,  
*June 1.*

The months roll on and summer opens, even here. It seems as though these long summer days were ever made for victories. Let us have patience and put our trust in God!

ECK  
*June 3.*

We are awaiting the rain, the lightning, the storm, a discharge from this leaden sky which bears down upon us like an overwhelming yoke. The air is stagnant and heavy, and in this stove-like atmosphere the persistent and innumerable flies buzz about in irritating clouds. The Boches, like ourselves, drowsily await the beneficent downpour in the depths of their nauseous trenches. In this motionless heat the ruins of Eck emit an odour of carrion; foul stenches rise in whiffs from the earth thrown over the bodies of dead animals. To escape from these emanations, we remain in the room, still respected by the shells, of the house, of which we are the inhabitants since yesterday.

A short time ago we were looking through the window of the garret which serves as a look-out for the artillerymen. But the Boches, whom we could not succeed in seeing, must have caught sight of us, for a .77 shrapnel came and burst close to us, and obliged us to leave our post. The battery

which sent us that plaything has doubtless no spare ammunition, for it there and then stopped its outlay.

In the sinuous and complicated trenches which the Boches have constructed opposite ours there does not appear to be many soldiers; they are probably guarded merely by an inconsiderable cordon of watchers. I believe that, having firmly established their entrenchments and protected themselves by a profusion of barbed-wire entanglements, they leave small units to watch the first lines, whilst holding in reserve, a little in the rear, at Munster for instance, companies capable of being rapidly brought to one point or another, according to requirements. It is indisputable that they possess consummate science in the consolidation of the ground and the utilization of their means of action. The plan of their trenches is drawn up in accordance with studied principles; and flanking by means of machine-guns, now so important, is always marvelously assured with them. It is doubtless by reason of their example (they have taught us so many things in this war) that the rule for machine-guns consists, when on the defensive, in placing them as far as possible in advance of the trenches, so as to sweep the whole of the ground by enfilade fire parallel to the axis of the trench.

I am glad to know that Joseph is getting used to trench-life. He has too much energy, strength, high spirits and good humour not to become master of the situation very quickly. Moreover, notwithstanding his isolation, he is not abandoned; he is, like each of us, in the keeping of God.

*June 5.*

We leave Eck this evening. The whole battalion is to assemble in a few days somewhere in the woods. What does this gathering mean? What have they got for us to do? I know nothing about it and don't want to bother myself. It is very probable that within the next few days an important action will take place in our district. By the grace of God!

I have no need to ask you for the assistance of your prayers for me and for all those I am to lead. I hope, moreover, that the 11th Battalion, faithful to its fine traditions, will comport itself there worthily, as it has done elsewhere.

HAESLEN CAMP,

*June 12.*

We are among the pines, in the hollow of a ravine which more or less shelters us from eventual shells. We are training in view of coming hardships, for it is still rumoured that we are going to take part in an important action around Metzeral. . . .

Very pretty and soul-stirring was that mass among the pines, with singing, the band, and an admirable resonant sermon by the chaplain. . . . But for all that I do not relinquish the medals and crucifixes you gave me, but always carry them on me.

*June 14.*

My dear papa, here we are at the date when we usually prepare to celebrate your anniversary. This

year everything is so different that the wishes we can offer you are all united in that great desire to see each other again which sums up all our hopes. But one hardly dares to wish anything. The best we can do is to pray for each other and to remain closely united by remembrances and affection. Only on the day when God brings us together again will there be any true anniversary in this world for us.

If that day is not to dawn, we also know towards what heights our hope must be directed. Boundless confidence is in those who believe.

We are on the point of departure. To-night we leave our camp to approach the neighbouring region where a big offensive is to take place. I know that you will pray for me, and great is my confidence.



**METZERAL**



## CHAPTER VII

### METZERAL

*June 15.*

Magnificent weather: a day made for victory. Since yesterday the guns on all sides roar incessantly. The din is infernal. Machine-guns and fusillades crepitate at intervals. Aeroplanes are humming as they circle round and round in the blue and sunny sky. This is indeed war.

We are in the woods with piled arms, ready to march at the first signal.

I am very well. My desire is to kill Boches.

Long live France!

*June 17.*

What a din! Shells have been falling and bursting like fury around us since this morning. The battalion came to the first line to relieve the units, fairly hard hit, which captured the Braun-Kopf from the Boches during the last few days.

The Braun-Kopf is a large, rocky and sparsely-wooded hill which commands Metzeral on the south, and is itself commanded by another higher and more important hill, the Almatt-Kopf. These two *Kopf*

are connected by a sort of entrance. The Boches' trenches, formidable, and bordered by barbed wire, furrowed in several tortuous lines the brow of the Braun-Kopf. The first attack, made on the 15th, succeeded, after a mighty artillery preparation, in taking the summit of the Braun-Kopf.

On the 16th the same battalion, the 6th, captured fresh trenches, and now the whole of the Braun-Kopf is ours. The 11th Battalion has come to relieve the 6th, which has had not a few losses. My company is not the farthest advanced; we are in a trench running parallel with the departure point, where the attack has not been able to progress, a hundred metres from a small wood, called the Bois Noir, which the Boches hold.

The scene is not a pleasant one. The brow of the Braun-Kopf is completely devastated by the artillery. There is hardly a spot where the earth has not been torn up; everything is topsy-turvy—an unimaginable intanglement of barbed wire and twisted, shattered, torn-up *Chevaux de frise*—a mass of débris, ripped open earth-bags, dead bodies of infantrymen and Germans, some of them half buried, others mutilated by shells, and sometimes Boches and Frenchmen side by side, all in strange attitudes, just as they were when death seized them. Rifles, the bayonets of which glitter in the sun, are strewn by the side of these bodies. . . . An indescribable picture of havoc and ruin!

Three companies of the 11th Battalion, arranged in a semi-circle on the slope of the ridge, now occupy the conquered trenches and endure this infernal avalanche of iron stoically. The enormous

210 and 150 mm. shells, which you can hear coming from afar, slowly and with insidious murmur, pulverize the round-topped hill, which at times disappears under clouds of black smoke and red dust. Above the blue flakes of the .77 shrapnel scatter uninterrupted. Where we are a few shells arrive from time to time; but up to the present they have fallen outside the trench and have wounded only one man of the company.

The valley of the Fecht opens before us, and at the base of the slopes the village of Metzeral, which our artillerymen have been shelling for two days past, is burning, house by house. A great part of it is already in ruins. On the houses still intact the shells are pouring, destroying everything and lighting fresh fires. What a spectacle! And what a war which destroys everything, spares nothing, and seems to have no other object than to annihilate!

They are also fighting on the other side of the valley: the neighbouring division, the 66th, is acting on the offensive at the same time as our own. These two movements are, doubtless, to converge near the bottom of the valley, on the lower side of Metzeral. On the opposite crest we can clearly see the black clouds of earth as the big shells burst. Yesterday afternoon we watched through our glasses an assault made over there by a company of infantry, and followed quite well the two successive waves of little black specks advancing over the meadows and leaping into the Boche trench, where the fight was continued with hand-grenades.

All that is hard work. Against positions organized as the Germans know how, the rôle of the infantry,

even after the artillery has done its part, is not easy. An intense and prolonged preparation, a powerful concentration of fire which almost annihilates the works to be taken and their garrisons, is necessary.

Here the artillery preparation had been carefully carried out. During the first attack the firing lasted four hours, during which the peppering of the enemy positions never ceased. Advantageous points have been taken, but at a heavy cost. Fortunately the Boches have also had losses.

During yesterday and the day before we took about 450 prisoners. We saw a detachment of them pass yesterday evening on their way to Gérardmer; they were all very dirty and very glad to be henceforth safe and sound.

I do not believe that the offensive is over; and there will doubtless be still more work to be done hereabouts.

I no longer dream of the future; I no longer make plans, and I should like to be without a desire. The future is according to the will of God. For the time being, I desire merely to do my duty as well as possible; the rest does not depend on me.

*June 19.*

The uproar continues, or rather it recommences after a quiet morning. The artillery is preparing for the attack which is to be resumed this evening. It is probable that we shall be in action before night. For the time being my company is on the Braun-Kopf. The Boches have been driven to the bottom of the

slopes and we have advanced to the outskirts of Metzeral. This evening we ought to continue to progress and endeavour to capture the village and the Bois Noir, which up to now has resisted. The two companies which have advanced have been somewhat put to the test: a captain and a sub-lieutenant are killed. Major Foret is seriously wounded on the hand.

By the grace of God!

*June 20.*

I am still on my legs and well. For some time past I have been reckoned in the battalion as one of the "unkillables," and, although the war is far from finished, I ask myself whether a bullet or a shell will ever do for me. My heartfelt thanks are due to God for sparing me so long, and I shall be hard set later to merit my many escapes from death.

But all is not over, and the occasions will be still numerous. At the very moment I am writing to you 130 mm. shells are bursting close to our trench, the fragments whistling over our heads. If one of these *marmites* falls on the shelter where I am, it will be all up with me. . . . But why talk about that? Why even think of it? We ought to desire neither life nor death, knowing neither what awaits us in this world, nor what the next reserves for us. Very often, on seeing, as everywhere here, the bodies of those who have fallen under shot or shell, I think we ought not to pity them, and that their death affects us still more than it does them; because they have often had

no time to suffer, whereas we retain regret and prolonged sorrow at their absence. Yes, the real victims of death are those who continue to live. It is the same with death as with a departure: the most distressed are not those who go away, but those who see them depart.

However, let us know how not to wish for anything. We love life because, in spite of all, being of this world, we see with worldly eyes. If we knew the other life—the true one—which is hidden behind what we call death, we should desire it to the extent of detesting that which is lent to us for a few years. We should be always perfectly happy if we did not blind ourselves.

I cannot tell why to-day I make all these wholly abstract reflections to you, when we are surrounded by the realities of war. There are so many dead lying around us on the devastated ground that we cannot refrain from thinking of what remains of so many lives suddenly cut off.

Yesterday evening we began an attack on the Bois Noir, an evil pine wood from which the Boches obstinately refuse to decamp, and from which it is difficult to dislodge them, because they have barbed wire and machine-guns everywhere. The Boches, seeing that we threatened to debouch on to the slopes of the Braun-Kopf, immediately opened an intense barrage fire with the .77 batteries, the .105 howitzers and a large 130 gun which carries from Munster. The first section of my company had hardly begun its movement outside the trench when it was met by a continuous storm of bullets. Three men were killed and a dozen wounded.

The Boches have lost several important positions; we have driven them as far as the lower part of the valley. They are holding on in Metzeral, on the outskirts of the ruined village, where their machine-guns are still hidden. General de Pouydraguin, who commands our division, has just been mentioned in De Maud'huy's army orders for the brilliant results obtained these last few days.

For the moment, we must at all cost retain this Braun-Kopf which the 6th Battalion captured. Poor 6th Battalion! The ground is strewn with its dead bodies, which we find everywhere—in the grass, in the Boche trenches, in shell-holes, and in the trench running parallel with our lines (*parallèle d'attaque*), on which the German batteries poured a furious fire when the offensive began. As to the Braun-Kopf, it is an appalling charnel-house. . . . Ah! this is not fighting in kid gloves.

*June 21.*

A hard day! . . . Never before has the 6th Company been through so trying an ordeal.

In action this morning with another company, we rapidly gained a good bit of ground by advancing on the lower slopes of the Braun-Kopf, in conjunction with the 22nd Battalion, which was attacking Metzeral at the bottom of the valley. This village, which had just been overwhelmed under an avalanche of our big shells, was easily occupied in a few seconds by the 22nd.

We advanced at the same time and dislodged the Boches from the trenches to which they were stick-

ing at the lower part of the Braun-Kopf. But, either by bullets, or especially by the shells which were raining down to stop our advance, many of our brave infantry fell. All my *chefs de section* are gone, Cap-depon and two others being killed and the fourth rather seriously wounded. I cannot tell exactly how many men I have left. A sad evening! . . . The last houses of Metzeral are burning. . . .

God has spared my life, but how I know not!

*June 22.*

The Germans, doubtless somewhat exhausted, have shown to-day not the slightest desire to counter-attack. "We have, all the same, made them reflect just here the last few days," is what I repeat to myself, in order not to deplore too bitterly the grievous losses with which we have purchased success.

On the evening of the day before yesterday we relieved another company of the battalion at the advanced positions on the Braun-Kopf. Yesterday morning, about nine o'clock, the order came to get ready to march and to advance in conjunction with the 22nd Battalion, which was attacking Metzeral. For more than two hours past our heavy artillery had been literally pounding this unfortunate village to pieces. The movement began at ten o'clock. My company was the first in action, immediately on the left of the 22nd, which was already entering the ruins of Metzeral.

The ground on which we had to manœuvre was

very cut up and uneven, with the result that the views were very restricted. To conform to the movement of the 22nd Battalion, which I had been ordered to support, I sent the four sections of my company into action in little columns, one by one, ready to deploy. And they marched, and very well too. . . . Gallant fellows! Already tired and fatigued by four days and nights passed under hard conditions, they boldly went into battle, advancing under a deluge of shells and amidst a veritable storm of bullets. Shrapnel whistled incessantly over our heads, whilst the deafening bursting of big shells surrounded us on all sides; and to such an extent that our losses were principally due to *marmites*.

Here we came in contact with the Boches, who, badly entrenched and already shaken, gave way before us. But before withdrawing towards the thickets at the lower part of the valley, they fired a few rifle-shots almost point-blank, and in that way two sub-lieutenants fell at the head of their section. Capdepon is one of them—killed by a bullet through his heart whilst leading on his men. He met the impeccable death becoming to him. Yesterday evening, on going to remove his body from the grass and collect the articles he had on him, I found him stretched at full length, in the attitude he had when death surprised him, his features perfectly composed, the face natural and bearing its usual expression. This is a beautiful and decent—an irreproachable death! Jean must have died in the same manner on August 29 among the broom of the Pass of Anozel. In the presence of

such deaths one asks oneself whether one ought to pity or to envy.

Capdepon's death is a serious loss for our company and the 11th Battalion.

The three other *chefs de section* of the company also fell. One of them was a very young adjutant—he was only eighteen—named D'Eichtal, a tall fair-complexioned youth with a fine bearing and very brilliant, and who would soon have made an excellent officer. . . .

But this is war. And not the least of its cruelties is to have to look coldly on all those who have fallen around us. However, though the school is a hard one, I do not doubt that it is salutary.

*Au revoir!*—the guns are at work and shells whistle in all directions. In Metzeral, which is still burning, the cartridge dépôts abandoned by the Germans are exploding with a crackling sound. It is raining. Pray for me.

*June 23.*

The Boches are decidedly depressed; they have hardly shown any sign of life since yesterday. Needless to add that the bodies they have left about us give evident signs of death. When patrolling at night in the thickets, we find almost everywhere abandoned knapsacks and rifles and heaps of articles of all sorts: spiked helmets, equipments, great-coats, tools, and even bottles of old Bordeaux—some of them empty, the others not yet uncorked, so they had not time to drink it all before making off. At any rate this time they have touched glasses containing something else

than Bordeaux. Out of revenge, their artillery is peppering us with shells; but now that we are underground it does us little harm. Much noise and a very small result.

*June 26.*

Decidedly, it looks as though the Boches had no great desire to come and provoke us. Since our movement has stopped we neither see nor hear them, and one would think they had taken French leave but for their guns which, day and night, distribute a few shells among us, or their star-shells which go up from night until morning from the outskirts of the Bois Noir, from which we shall not be long perhaps in dislodging them.

*July 1.*

Another month has come round, the eleventh of this incredible war. No one can say how many months will yet be completed, how many others will open before this terrible problem has been solved.

Really, it is impossible to fail to put our trust in Providence, which knows where it is leading us and along what paths. How then do those who do not believe in anything manage at this time?

But are there really people who do not believe in anything? That is a question I am asking myself more than ever. Doubtless certain folk profess to be free-thinkers, but at bottom—— When, standing face to face with themselves, they calmly consider the incomprehensible enigmas of their own

existence, do they really believe in nothing at all?—in no cause, in no end? That is humanly impossible. They are merely assuming an attitude, adopting a convenient but hollow formula behind which to hide their embarrassment, their doubt, or their pride. Man necessarily believes in something beyond human ken, in something not himself and which governs, precedes and survives him. We can all say: "I am, therefore I believe," as Descartes said: "I think, therefore I am." For the slightest act of intelligence, the tiniest spark of moral life exceeds the boundaries of the visible world and is dependent on another domain. No, those who say: "I do not believe in anything," deceive themselves; and when they add: "I do not feel the need of belief," they seek to deceive others. These people either preach of their own free will and are sinful; or else, at the most, they seek freedom from doubt. If they doubt, they are to be pitied and enlightened. But in that case they are no longer unbelievers, otherwise they would not be possessed by this torment of doubt.

One of the profitable lessons of these great events of the war will be and is already this, that they have greatly illuminated the darkness and placed face to face with the truth—so plain and so near—many souls who were seeking it elsewhere, or who pretended to ignore it. But it is never truth which flees from us; it is we ourselves who sometimes turn aside from it, because, relying on our own poor abilities, we cannot distinguish the true from the false, and mistake the false lights lit by ourselves for the true beacon. The most uncom-

promising of heretics are perhaps quite near the true light: sometimes they have but a step to take, an act of humility or a little "spiritual cleansing" to accomplish.

What a strange war!

Formerly, there were battles; between the battles the soldiers marched and rested. Now there are no longer either battles or truces; there is only war without a minute's rest, without an inch of ground unoccupied. Progress demands that. There is no longer either strategy, or combination, or skill, or intelligence, but only endurance, tenacity, patience and obstinacy.

I cannot make up my mind as to which of the two forms of war is the harder. War nowadays, in spite of, or even because of the negative importance of the individual combatant, possesses perhaps more merit than the older form.

That reminds me of the following remark made one day by a *gavroche*<sup>1</sup> of my company: "Do you think, touchy Achille, that if Napoleon's soldiers and all those famous chaps had had to face shells like these they would have skedaddled immediately?" What have the light-footed Achille and the grenadier of Austerlitz got to say about that?

#### *July 4.*

We returned yesterday evening to the same trench, on the lower slopes of the Braun-Kopf, immediately above the valley of the Fecht, at the point where the river, leaving Metzeral, flows towards Mul-

<sup>1</sup> Parisian street arab.

bach and Munster. The weather is fine and very hot; even at this time of the year the Vosges offer great variations in temperature.

What a delightful country this upper Alsace must be when living in gaiety and peace! What exquisite little villages amidst these clumps of walnut trees or of ash, in the hollow of cool and flowery dales!

And these old granite-hearted mountains, worn by the centuries, how sweetly they enframe these lovely valleys between their broad round brows, sometimes capped by majestic fir plantations, sometimes simply clothed with their huge meadows, on which are scattered grey or red splashes—cottages with brick roofs! In the woods curious footpaths, which appear to lead nowhere, wind indefinitely among the innumerable colonnades, whilst here and there, around a spring or a rustic watering-place, a clearing appears, enclosed by little low dry stone walls, all festooned with lichens. Everywhere—in the forest, in the stubble-fields, between the rocks on the mountain crests, or in the folds of the valleys—there is a display of verdure, a profusion of flowers which, knowing that summer will be short, hasten to grow. Immense fields are carpeted by thick-set ferns; and amidst all this still tender verdure the tall clusters of pink foxglove sway incessantly in the breeze. Yes, it is a pretty country; very different, doubtless, from our Alps, but stamped with a calm, somewhat sad and vaguely Virgilian sublimity. Notwithstanding this acknowledgment, I do not believe that I shall ever experience later, if I return from the war, the desire to see again all these landscapes, which recall so much blood and

mourning. In the future these stately Vosges will appear enveloped in that dignity, that funereal and pensive majesty which tombs possess. Those who then take the road to their battle-fields will come here, no longer as heedless tourists, but as pious pilgrims.

There are vague rumours that the 11th is to be relieved, that the battalion will shortly go to Gérardmer, or the suburbs, for a rest. Would this be an opportunity for us to see each other again? I have very often thought of it and asked myself if it were possible and if it could be arranged?

*July 5.*

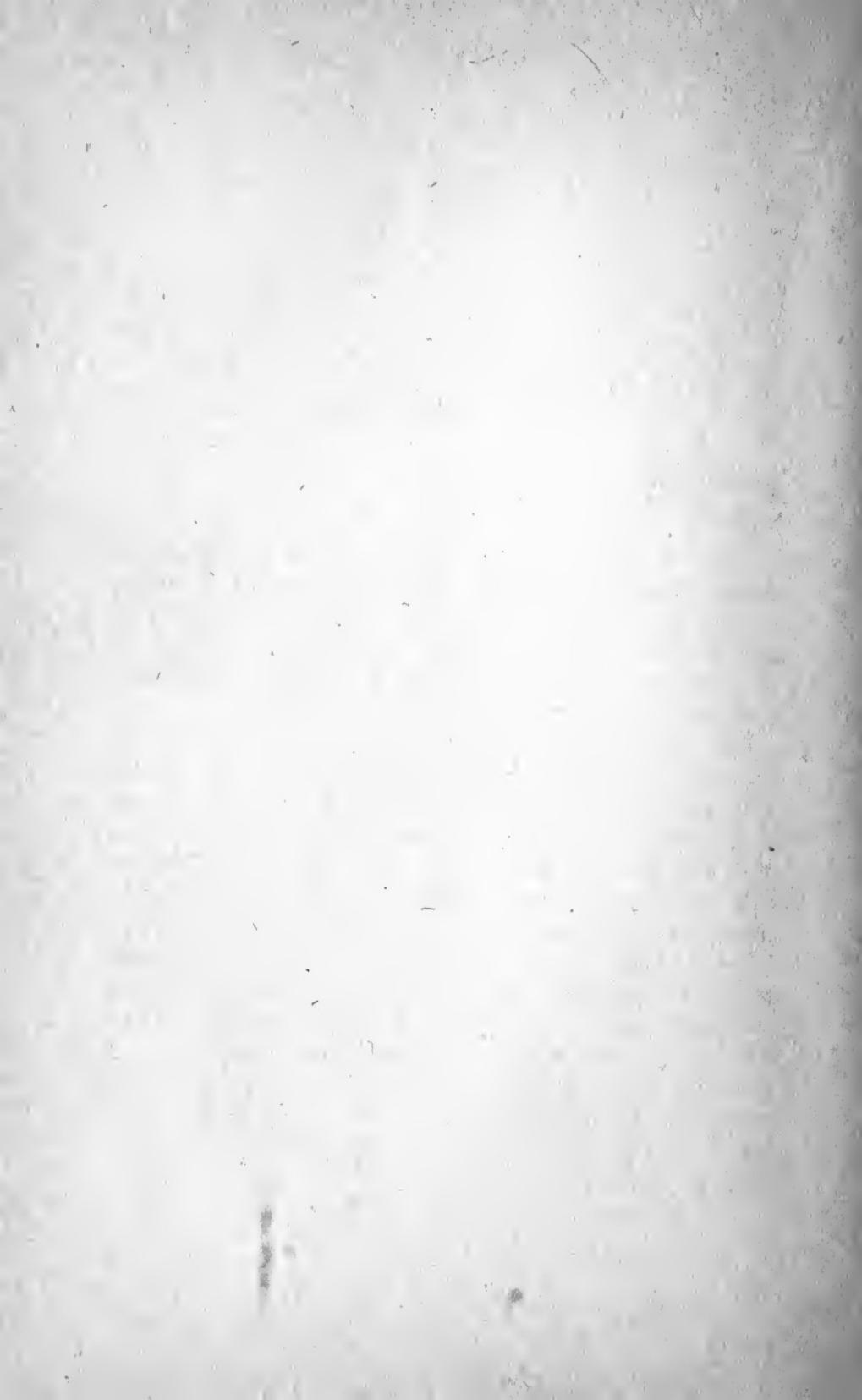
It has been decided. We are relieved this evening and leave for Gérardmer, where we arrive sometime to-morrow morning. We shall remain there, I believe, a few days.

All is well . . . we shall be able to wash ourselves, change our clothes, sleep in a bed! It will soon be five months since we did that!

But what a piece of good luck if I could embrace you!



THE LINGEKOPF



## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LINGEKOPF

GÉRARDMER,  
*July 8.*

YES! Gérardmer! After almost five months' absence, the 11th Battalion, with the buglers in front, re-entered, on the morning of the day before yesterday, the hospitable little town which had welcomed it in February, on its return from the plains of Flanders and the mud of Artois.

On February 19, after a month's stay, we left for Alsace, where the 11th Battalion arrived in the nick of time to fight. The early days in the snow, in the midst of those woods without shelters, and with the struggle to maintain, were far from delightful. Then, quietness having returned on that bit of the front, we spent weeks and months in that valley, (first of all buried in snow, then little by little more smiling), in digging trenches, building shelters, and stretching barbed wire. Afterwards came the attacks on Metzeral, where the battalion shed a little more of its blood. Suddenly, when we were hardly thinking any more of rest, we were informed that we were to come to Gérardmer. And here we are.

It was on the night of July 5 that the 23rd Battalion came to relieve us on the lower slopes of the Braun-Kopf. As soon as they were relieved, the companies, one by one, ascended first of all to Garchoney and then to the Honeck, over the top of which we passed at daybreak, in time to avoid the malevolence of the *marmites* which fell there.

At Collet, on the French side of the Schlucht, we found a number of motor-lorries which took us down to Gérardmer in a few minutes. The motors put us down at the Avenue du Lac at 5.30 a.m., on July 6, and we then marched in step to the Kléber barracks, making our boots ring on the causeway of the deserted streets, the windows of which were half-opened as we passed.

Yesterday afternoon we received a visit from General de Maud'huy who commands the army. He distributed several medals and *croix de guerre*. To my great surprise I received from him a *croix de guerre*, with the palm-branch, for a mention in army orders of which I had been told, but which I hardly expected. I merely thought that this would give you pleasure. The gallant general himself ordered the battalion to present arms; and on decorating us, he kissed us all. He is one of the finest figures among the chiefs who do honour to the French armies. You have only to see him to be conscious of the race,—his uprightness, bravery, and kindness of heart. We ought to have had many Frenchmen of that type.

*July 10.*

This morning, about six o'clock, a *Taube* flew across our sky and dropped a bomb, which failed to burst. It made off without persisting.

Apart from that, the days have been quiet. We forget that we are at war, in spite of uniforms, convoys, ammunition wagons and big guns which, one by one, are taken towards the Schlucht, dragged by powerful motor-tractors.

GÉRARDMER,  
*July 11.*

I have just received your letter on coming from mass. God's will be done! Both Jean and Joseph are now safe from dangers and the only real miseries; they have entered into that felicity which is so perfect that we cannot imagine it. The happiness and security they will henceforth enjoy largely compensates for all our sadness. But we must not give way to sadness: they have come to the end of all their sufferings. May God have pity upon you and assist you to bear this fresh loss, to accept it like that of Jean, like all separations in this world which are not final. It is but a question of years. . . .

Now, you must not be anxious about me. Try to live whilst accepting unflinchingly the idea that we shall not perhaps see each other again in this life. By that means, if I return from the war, our joy will only be the greater. But God knows what He is asking of you and why. Let us continue to pray to Him with greater faith and confidence—to

ask Him, not for what we desire, but for what He desires for us.

Courage! Let us carry out our daily duty still better. That is the best and surest refuge whilst awaiting the other.

*July 12.*

. . . How sad the house will be now, and how emptier it will seem, although Joseph long since left it! He will never enter it again. But that house is not your real home. Our real home is the one awaiting us all, our dear absent ones—he, Jean, Emile and Jacques. He is privileged like all have been, since they have directly attained the goal towards which our life is a constant effort. They are relieved of every ill; they are sheltered from every danger; they have definitely escaped from suffering.

The new world of the other life into which Joseph has just entered we are unable to imagine, because incapable of conceiving perfect happiness. We can only believe in it, without understanding. Notwithstanding our faith, we suffer at being separated; but that proves nothing, except that suffering in the condition of our life in this world. But sorrow uplifts us to resignation and confidence, and the heavier the sacrifice the more reason we find for hoping and submitting. It seems to me that between sorrow and consolation there is, as it were, a balance: the more acutely we suffer, the more perfect consolation will be and the greater our peace.

May these trials teach us not to moan, not to desire, and to ask for nothing except what God chooses for us.

AT THE HAESLEN CAMP,  
*July 6.*

Whilst I am watching through the motionless branches of the pines the white clouds which are scudding across the sky, you are perhaps wending your way across the little Pass of Anozel and Jean's tomb. I trust that this fairly fine day will have permitted you to accomplish that pilgrimage. Thus, your journey will have enabled you to pay two visits and to tighten still further the bonds which, in spite of separations, unite us. It is but a little time—a few months or a few years—which separates us from you, Jean and Joseph and myself; only, we make a great difference between those whose souls, being disembodied, no longer possess form, and the others who still speak to the eyes.

Yesterday evening, on leaving you at Gérardmer railway station, I returned to the hotel to get my things together, and at about 8.30 a motor-car came to take me towards the Schlucht.

Along that magnificent road, on which we were continually meeting the heavy motor-lorries of the commissariat, returning empty, we sped to the humming music of the motor between superb pines, gradually mingling with the darkness. The white highway stretched out before us, twisting and ascending in the gathering obscurity. Meanwhile, with my face lashed by the cold air of the moun-

tain and the night, I retained a vision of your departing train, moving first of all slowly, then more quickly, and finally disappearing towards the narrow gorge of the Vologne. I was not sad—nor am I sad to-day; only that recollection, still so close and which receded at each bound of the car, enveloped and saturated me. Since I left you, I preserve through having seen you a little more tranquillity, a little more tenderness and peace of mind. I seem now to be moving more peaceably towards my destiny, whatever it may be. Little matter to me what people say or do, or what happens! I know, I feel every minute that you are at the same moment somewhere on this earth, that you love me, that I love you, and that that is stronger than all the rest.

How good God is to have permitted that meeting of a few days! What happens henceforth will not count for much by the side of those three days, the happiest I have experienced since the beginning of the war. How keenly one feels that nothing can ever destroy the bonds which unite several beings, to form them into a family! Death? But that, in trying them, strengthens them all the more. These bonds are part of ourselves—not of our bodies, which perish and are survived by them, but of our souls which they cause to participate eternally in a selfsame life.

We are, then, at Haeslen Camp, and, naturally, among the pines. I write to you on my return from a reconnaissance all we officers of the battalion have made in the sector where we are shortly to be in action, above . . . quite near a sector we occupied

for several months before going towards Metzeral. Attacks are to begin soon. Meanwhile, two companies go every night to work at the "parallels"—very advanced trenches, as near as possible to the German lines, and whence the attacking troops debouch at the chosen hour.

HAESLEN CAMP,  
*July 18.*

A few words before going to sleep in my little wooden hut, on a comfortable truss of straw. We have spent the night digging and working at the famous "parallel" from which, one of these days, we shall spring to attack the Boche trenches. We remain ready to start at any moment of the day or night. In the meanwhile, we are resting, accumulating our strength for the effort we are shortly to make.

This little camp, crowded among the pines at the edge of a splendid white road and alongside a modest stream which supplies us with sufficient water for our toilet and cooking, is a veritable improvised Carthusian monastery. The huts are summary, but sufficient to protect us from rain, if not from shells, which, however, have not paid us a visit since we have been here.

*July 20.*

Still waiting, ready to move forward from the little wood where we watch the hours pass, the aeroplanes fly by and the *marmites* fall.

I am fully disposed to do the Boches as much damage as possible.

*July 21.*

To-day the music is deafening; there is a full orchestra. Ever since 7 a.m. there has been an artillery tornado, a formidable thundering of the guns from one end of the valley to the other, whilst the sun shone from the purest of skies and the oak leaves in the little wood we inhabit trembled in the light breeze.

We ascended yesterday from Sulzern, bringing with us pickets and barbed wire, grenades and bombs, gas-masks and fanions (the last named to enable our gunners to calculate their range of ulterior objectives); and, thus equipped from head to foot, we are waiting, crouched in the hollow of a trench, so as not to attract the attention of the Boches, who are not far off.

It is true that they must be in a somewhat bad position for seeing what is happening, with the .120's and .155's peppering their trenches and projecting huge masses of stones, earth, pieces of wood and entire tree-trunks into the air. But the bombardment is above all impressive up there, on the Reichakerkopf, where clouds of all colours, ascending and at the same time spreading out between the branchless pines, are so close together that they mingle, enveloping the whole mountain, submerging it in a sea of dense smoke, slow to disperse. And fresh shells rain incessantly on that grey sheet, which thickens on one side as the wind drives it elsewhere. White plumes

of the .65's, tall black columns and showers of earth of the .120's and .155's, enormous clouds of the .220's like volcanic eruptions, an infernal avalanche of shot and shell, a diabolical cyclone bringing death and destruction—such is that fantastic spectacle, the vision of a person under hallucination or one who is insane.

But it is indeed reality: the warfare of to-day, the struggle of two great nations such as civilization and progress wish and permit.

Towards noon, after a final concentration of explosives, a sudden silence! More than one barrage of small shrapnel bursting high, punctuating the sky, still darkened by smoke rising from the ground, with light white cottony spots. It was the appointed time for the attack. A soul-stirring moment!

After the deafening din of the bombardment, that sudden silence signified that man was to enter on the scene. Blind and brutal matter could do no more than prepare the way. Something additional was now necessary—that trifle which is everything in war, and especially in this war: a soul behind a body. However fragile this body may be when faced by engines which kill, however weak this soul, infinite in space and time, may be, they are the veritable and decisive forces. What a paradox!

At that moment you are the prey to an obsessing thought: that of the lives which are mown down like corn. Especially when you hear, first of all indistinctly, then clearly and in quick succession, the cracking of the enemy's rifles and the dreadful pop! pop! pop! of the machine-guns, implacable and sinister as a clock.

So there are still men on the watch behind their fire-bays, marksmen still alive at their guns? There are still Boches waiting to resist us after such a hellish fire as that? . . . How, then, are they constructed, what are their nerves made of, and what sort of dugouts must they be which protect them?

However that may be, at the moment when, behind the last shells, the attacking companies debouched from the outskirts of the Sattel to advance on the Reichakerkopf, rifles and machine-guns began to speak; and although, placed where I am in this little wood, clinging to the side of a dale, it is difficult to form a very clear idea of what is happening up there, I fear that the struggle has been hard and that they have not greatly advanced. . . .

Our turn will come afterwards—later—when I know not. It matters little to me: we are ready. We know where we are to go and it is simple: it will suffice to get there as quickly as possible and stick there.

That will take but a few minutes: the time to cross the two or three hundred metres which separate us from our objective. Attacks now impress us much less than they did at the beginning. True they cost dear; but, apart from that, why regard those moments as different from any other moments in life? By the grace of God, eh? Here or elsewhere, to-day or to-morrow, or later, we are sure to die. The essential thing is to die nobly, and until then to live nobly. Thank you for praying for me.

*To a friendly family.*  
*A letter written after the death of his brother*  
*Joseph.*

*July 24, 1915.*

You know, doubtless, the principal and sad piece of news that I am able to send you: God, for the second time, has demanded from my father and mother the greatest sacrifice that parents can make. This is the second of my brothers (called to the colours many months after myself) whom I shall never see again.

He fell on July 2 in that wild Argonne where the woods are more treacherous than elsewhere, the struggles more desperate, the weapons more murderous . . . the victims more numerous.

God's will be done!

My brother wished to become a priest—desired nothing more than to live a life of devotion and sacrifice. God demanded the greatest sacrifice from him . . . and yet the easiest, because life held in store for him many trials and vexations which he will thus be spared. He is now happy—happier than he would ever have been in this world, which would have made him suffer more than others, because of his generous soul and pure heart. Inevitable contact with mediocrity and ugliness would have wounded him deeply, have aroused him indignation, even have disgusted him, but would never have repelled him, for he possessed the strength and the goodness of those who are gentle and humble.

It is left to others to scatter the good seed which

he will sow no more. The merit of his death, accepted beforehand almost joyfully, will devolve upon others and be a precious aid to them. As far as he is concerned, the light towards which his soul ascended of its own accord envelops it and he will nevermore know the darkness he dreaded. He is perfectly, absolutely, eternally happy.

Now, come what may!

Our sector is still very perturbed, and we still await many events. So much the better! We must work incessantly; we must be able to say every evening: "I have gained a victory." For there are always victories to be gained, over others, and above all over oneself.

*July 22.*

My dear mamma. Amidst the uncertainty and expectation, the orders and counter-orders of the last few days I let your birthday go by without writing to you. You well know what I can say to you, what I wish you, not only to-day, but every day. These anniversaries are above all occasions for remembering each other and for hoping.

What I wish you, neither I, alas! nor any one can give you: it can come to you only from God. But we can all pray to Him, and I well know that in heaven, Emile, Jacques, Jean and Joseph continually pray to Him for you. What I wish you is peace, not that which men ask for as an end to this horrible war, but the peace which depends neither on our struggles, nor on our treaties, nor on our conventions, the peace

that no worldly event can disturb, because it comes not from this world.

Here we are still in a state of expectation. The guns thunder incessantly on one side or the other; shrapnel and bombs burst almost over our heads at this very moment. But however numerous and black they may be, shells will never succeed in completely effacing the blue of the heavens. Let us fix our gaze on that azure.

*July 25.*

The *communiqués* which reached us yesterday evening reported fairly comforting successes on our side; but I fear they have not been maintained. Contrary to the Metzeral attacks, in which we found no great number of men before us, the Boches are showing here a stubborn resistance, and they certainly possess large reinforcements. Their immediate and repeated counter-attacks prove it. It is said that an army corps is concentrated in the district of Colmar. That is not likely to contribute to the easy accomplishment of our task.

We have entered on a period of necessary activity, for important results must be obtained before winter. There will certainly still be some hot encounters in these parts. Personally I shall not be sorry for that. I realize the value of action more than ever, and what a blessing it is for us who, generally, take badly to idleness. Physically and morally it is better to do no matter what than nothing.

*July 29.*

This time we shall not have to wait long.

We have been holding ourselves in readiness, with piled arms, in the woods of the Pass of W—— since this morning. Four companies are already in the communication trenches. Two others, including my own, await orders here. The artillery has just begun its preliminary bombardment and the din is infernal. On all sides the .75's roar like raging lions; their detonations ring out and echo among the pines, which vibrate like metal stems. You can form no idea of this music. We cannot even hear the passing, very high in the sky or among the clouds, of the huge shells of the "heavies," which, slowly, continue their overwhelming fire above the tornadoes of the .75's. Something fresh will happen between now and this evening. I trust that the 11th Battalion will bear itself worthily. I entrust myself to the care of God, of my brothers whom I feel are very close to me—with me—amidst this storm. By the grace of God!

*July 30.*

I write to you from the bottom of a trench where we have been since yesterday evening; and in the little nook where I have fixed myself up as well as possible it rains gravel or stone alternately. What a quantity of this ruddy, sandy earth of the Vosges, which seems to be but the dust of their old worn rocks, we shall have picked up!

Yesterday will stand out in the record of our battalion, already so rich in adventures; but unfor-

tunately it will be recorded as one of the most sanguinary and saddest of days.

I hastily scribbled to you yesterday that my company awaited instructions to move. A few minutes later two companies of the 11th Battalion left their parallel trench and dashed forward to attack the outskirts of the Barrenkopf, followed a little later first by one and then by two other companies.

The struggle was fierce—nay, exceptionally fierce. The Boches, whom we have been punishing here for the past week, have brought up their finest troops (soldiers of the Guard, if you please!) to stop us, and huge quantities of ammunition. Consequently, yesterday's attack, which did not take them by surprise, was received by an intense barrage and terrible rifle and machine-gun fire.

The losses were heavy. Captain de Peyrelongue, in command of the 1st Company, was killed on the spot on leaving the trench. Several other officers were also killed and others wounded. Throughout the night the trenches communicating with the rear were filled with a lamentable stream of wounded men, some of them walking alone, with bandaged heads and arms in slings; others dragging their legs along, assisted by comrades; whilst the more seriously wounded, sometimes moaning in a hollow voice, sometimes motionless and silent, like the dead, were carried on stretchers. This morning, several of them who could not be removed in the night are still there.

At nightfall I received an order to go and support the advanced line, ready to reinforce or relieve it.

Under a formidable artillery fire, which only stopped at night, we came here through devastated communication trenches, obstructed by splintered pine trees and blocks of shattered rock. Amidst that tornado of fire the whole company passed without having more than four men wounded. And here we are, squatting in our trenches, awaiting events.

On these fronts, bristling with barbed wire and fortresses, defended by weapons more and more overwhelming, one feels more strongly than ever that one must place oneself in the hands of God.

Yet one cannot say, in spite of this strength of material organization and armament, in spite of the enormous extent of this year-old battle—one cannot say, it seems to me, that individual worth is vain. In a certain sense more of it perhaps is needed in this war than was the case in any other. First of all, it is necessary to set aside absolutely all private interests and to sacrifice ourselves entirely for the success of the whole. Moreover, each individual has not his own task, set in advance, his fields of action where he will go according to his worth and gain more or less glory. It may happen here that the bravest is killed on making his first step outside the trench; and that the least courageous, chancing to escape the dangers of the battle-field, alone reaps the reward. A trooper's duty in this huge industrial war is a thousand times more thankless than was that of a soldier of Xenophon, or of Cæsar, or of Turenne; it is more disinterested, far fuller of great risks, and therefore more meritorious. Therein, it seems to me, lies the true glory of the *poilu* of 1914. Sacrifice

bestows it upon him. It is the same spirit, but inspired by a different faith, as that which animated the martyrs.

Indeed I often feel a profound admiration for my men, in considering their merit in leading, without a word of complaint, far from their homes and families, this humble, obscure, almost impersonal existence, in consenting, without a protest and even good-humouredly, to be the real instruments of victory, whilst remaining in the background and in oblivion.

And what about those who fall—almost always without any other witness than a companion or a case-hardened, almost indifferent comrade—those whose bodies, neglected in the midst of the tornado, have been there, in front of the trench, for several days, and whom nobody troubles to bury, to venerate in any special manner, because the spectacle is commonplace and it would be impossible to say which one was the worthiest of distinction? What about all these young men who have thrown themselves into the arms of death with a light heart and a smiling face? What about the “‘15 class”—the Jeans and the Josephs? Who realizes the extent of *their* sacrifice? Here, probably nobody, but their parents, their distant friends who do not care to display their sorrowful pride; and certainly God, in whose eyes the unknown death of the humblest *piou piou* is greater than that of the leader whom all honour and glorify. What puny, blind, ignorant, stupid creatures we are!

IN THE WOODS OF M—

*August 1.*

So almost the first year of war is completed! It will be a year to-morrow since the day I left you, on that hot and dusty Sunday—that tragic and anxious Sunday of the mobilization.

Once more I can see that arrival at Grenoble, at night, after an interminable journey; that rising of the moon in a tranquil sky, whilst the motor-car spun along the Voreppe road, by the side of flooded fields. Then that Sunday morning, the farewell mass at Saint-Hugues, with you—that contemplative fervent mass. I can still hear, sung by men's voices, that hymn which was so appropriate at such an hour: “Dieu de clémence, Dieu protecteur, sauvez la France, au nom du Sacré-Cœur.”

And I think of all that followed, of the various stages of this year of interminable warfare, in all weather and under all climates.

But when I read the present—that present which finds us still at war—I ask myself whether I have really witnessed all that and whether, to-day, I have passed through so many adventures without anything essential appearing to me different in the world or in myself.

That is to say that everything which changes varies insensibly, without jerks, and for that reason everything appears to us indefinitely the same; for I do not believe that the war has changed nothing. On the contrary it has effected everything and everybody. Even those who appear to have passed

through such events without receiving an impression are perhaps, whether they show it and admit it or not, the most changed by events. All this will be more evident afterwards, when everything has been restored to order again; for then the disorder will be visible to all. The most serious and principal result of this war will be above all what comes after it; and I imagine what we are seeing, or will yet see until the last cannon shot, is not the most extraordinary part of the cataclysm in which the world is involved. But these are very vague and premature ideas, without any other basis than that imaginary vision which, for each of us, puts the future into a more or less concrete form.

We are in reserve, a little behind the lines, after a few days which will count for the 11th Battalion.

I have already told you, I believe, that the battalion, brought forward in haste, has just attacked the Barrenkopf. It made the attack, in fact, on the afternoon of July 29, two companies at the appointed hour leaving their "parallels" to dash on the wood. Two others were to follow them closely, in echelons, in two successive waves. Sad and magnificent attack! Never perhaps—not even at Carency—has the 11th Battalion presented a finer spectacle: two companies proceeding to the attack in line as at manœuvres and coolly marching on that wood full of ambuscades across ground torn and ploughed up by shells and covered with the victims of preceding attacks. Very few reached the wood where soldiers of the Prussian Guard, standing in a trench that no shell had reached, with their rifles to their shoulders, picked off our

unfortunate infantry one by one. How many fell in that way, with a bullet through their head or heart, when covering the bare two hundred metres which separated them from the edge of the wood! And what must their thoughts have been, on drawing near to those fatal outskirts, when they beheld the Germans, shoulder to shoulder, waiting for them behind an inextricable entanglement of *chevaux de frise*, barbed wire, and abatis? Poor gallant fellows!

Machine-guns, concealed in the Schratzmaennelé quarries, on our left, enfiladed our line at the same time. When the last line was about to debouch, its leader, Captain de Peyrelongue, was shot through the heart, just as he was uttering the order: "Forward!" Nevertheless, a platoon of this company reached the edge of the wood, singing the *Sidi-Brahim*, but the majority fell on the way.

All those who arrived at the border of the wood, but a few metres from the Germans, who continued firing, took shelter in shell-holes, where they remained until the next evening, incessantly exchanging bullets, hand-grenades and bombs with the enemy. The officer—a marvellous soldier—who commanded this group, and who will shortly obtain the cross, which he has so long merited, having received orders to remain at his position, stuck there, notwithstanding his terrible (and, moreover, useless) predicament. Still many more of his men were killed. When the Boches called out to them, in bad French: "Surrender! Come along!" the lieutenant, himself setting the example, had the *Marseillaise* sung.

The two companies, when, on the following evening, they finally received the order to fall back, were found to have each lost more than . . . men. Both are to be mentioned in army orders.

There now you see how the honour of the *béret*<sup>1</sup> is upheld.

But these engagements of the Linge and Barrenkopf were very severe, and resulted in extremely heavy losses to us.

I was almost forgetting to tell you that on the evening of the day before yesterday I received a small shell-splinter in the left arm. It is hardly a wound, and I shall be annoyed if I am obliged to leave my company on account of such a trifle.

I went yesterday to the Alpine Ambulance at the Pass of W—, where, in a wooden shed, a veritable operating-room for big and urgent surgical cases has been installed. There they put me to sleep and made two exploratory incisions, which enabled them to find a tiny piece of cloth from my tunic, but unfortunately no shell-splinter, which has penetrated fairly deeply between the muscles. If there is nothing else to be done I shall go to Gérardmer to be radiographed and operated upon. There happens to be there a Lyons surgeon, named Laroyenne, who will easily rid me of this ridiculous little bit of metal.

GÉRARDMER,  
August 5.

I write you from Gérardmer, to which I descended

<sup>1</sup> The cap, like a tam-o'-shanter, worn by the mountain artillery.—Translator's note.

yesterday evening to have done with this wretched little shell-splinter. They radiographed me on my arrival and will this afternoon, I believe, extract the offending body. Once rid of this troublesome guest, I shall soon, I hope, be able to rejoin my company, which I was reluctant to leave for so small a matter.

It is said that there was another fairly hot engagement last night. The hospitals here are full of wounded.

*August 6.*

As I informed you this morning by telegram, I am progressing satisfactorily. The recalcitrant shell-splinter was extracted yesterday evening, and there is now but a small wound to heal.

I am thinking of rejoining the battalion as soon as possible, and shall be welcomed there, for it is rumoured here that it has been in vigorous action for the past two days at the Lingekopf, with heavy losses. A captain has been killed and several officers wounded. I deeply regret having been away from my men during these days of fighting. This Lingekopf is the mountain infantry's Moloch!

*August 7.*

I am really ashamed to have to remain here, resting and protected, whilst my brave men are suffering and enduring hard trials. I have just seen off at the railway station a lieutenant of my company, who, wounded in the thigh, has left for the rear. He told me that the battalion has undergone formidable

bombardments. Two auxiliary doctors, both wounded, also said that the Lingekopf was a hell upon earth. Poor 11th Battalion!—in what condition will you come out of that ordeal? All the battalions which have come in action there since July 20 (already sixteen have fought there) have been terribly knocked about.

The doctor who operated on me the day before yesterday and dressed my wound this morning will not permit me to leave yet. But I hope to have finished with this business soon. My arm is going on very well and gives me little pain.

*August 9.*

Still in a state of convalescence amidst the quietness of this little district, which, despite all its bustle, appears to me very peaceable when I think of what is happening up there.

This morning, at the hospital, where I spend a part of my time with wounded comrades, I saw for the first time in my life the flag of the mountain infantry which General de Pouydraguin is showing to every wounded *chasseur*. It is a fine piece of stuff, covered with stains and in faded colours. The brightest colours are those of the Legion of Honour and military medal, which are hanging from its staff. At the present time this flag is passing from one battalion to another. Each battalion has it in turn for four days. It will soon be the turn of the 11th Battalion. It is an excellent idea to bring it out in this way and to show it to the infantry, so few of whom have seen it up to now. Before men

who fight you must set up an image. Many of them are simple-minded and limited in intelligence, and to these such words as Country, the Ideal and even Duty are but abstractions. It is a good thing to materialize them by means of colours and form. Speak to them of their parish or their paternal roof when it is a question of country, and of the flag when you would symbolize honour and military duty. As regards the rest, you need not seek to inculcate a belief in an ideal, which neither their turn of mind nor their education allow them even to conceive. I am a strong believer in an ideal which I have often heard expressed: that men, most of their time, fight for their leader; they will expose and sacrifice themselves according to the amount of esteem they have for those who command them. If this is so, what a burden is on the shoulders of those who lead!

### August 13.

Once more I am back with the gallant *poilus* of the 11th Battalion, and for the past twenty-four hours have been with them in the woods, or at any rate in something which was a wood, but which is now no more than chaos. Here nature is disfigured by war. There is not a tree-trunk which does not bear the trace of shot or shell; the bark of the pines bears gashes either slight or deep; other trees are amputated half way up, or cut off close to the ground. The largest have sometimes been broken off by shells as though they had been mere sticks. Shattered branches lie everywhere on

the ground or in shell craters. The number of French or Boches' shells that this wretched little peak has received during the past month is unimaginable.

It is near the summit of this famous Lingekopf, where we are, that the 11th Battalion has been since August 5, in close contact with the Boches, who, after having been driven from it have returned to the charge, without much success however. The crest itself is occupied neither by them nor by us. The rival trenches are face to face at a short distance on the rounded brow which forms the summit. Between these two lines the ground has become a charnel-house. The bodies of infantrymen who have fallen in the course of successive attacks and the bodies of Germans killed by our guns in recent counter-attacks lie stretched in all positions amidst twisted barbed wire and felled pine trees. At certain times the air is tainted with an abominable smell. My company is at the extremity of this crest on a steep and rocky slope, which dips down rapidly. There a sort of wall has been built—a rampart of stones and bags of earth. Loop-holes have been made in it, and we have succeeded in stretching a few strands of barbed wire in front. Behind this wall the infantry hold themselves ready day and night to receive and repulse attacks which the Germans may attempt against us.

This situation is interesting; it is, from every point of view, more agreeable than that of the second and third lines, first of all because one can see what is in front of one, and also because we almost completely escape bombardment, which cannot

reach us on the descent and so near the German trenches.

On the other hand, we are within range of aerial torpedoes and bombs. I must confess that the effect they produce in no way resembles the tranquillity of the evenings on the shores of the lake of Gérardmer. Yesterday evening the concert began about 8.30 and lasted hardly half an hour, but during that time it was infernal: an incessant shower of bombs and hand-grenades, the smoke of which obscured the air by lingering near the ground. In this opaque atmosphere, similar to a dense fog, the detonations followed rapidly upon each other, each explosion shedding a dull gleam within the cloud. And through this curtain came the cracking of fusillades, the smacking of bullets flattening on stones, the screeching of rebounding projectiles, and at times the whistling of volleys of .65 shells, which passed above our heads before bursting on the German block-houses. But the noise is not everything. To make the fantastic side of the evening complete star-shells went up from all points of the line, rose heavenwards in all directions, describing above the tops of the pines criss-cross curves, and descending in the wood in dazzling globes. By their light the wood was illumined almost continuously by an unearthly lactescent fantastic light. What a fairy-like scene!

I had never witnessed such a spectacle, in which everything—sight, hearing, smell, imagination—was dazzled, stunned, and yet almost exalted. However, very little damage—only two wounded in my company; very little for such a row. The

men, moreover, quickly recovered possession of themselves amidst this saraband. You should have seen them, under the light of the star-shells, gliding like foxes towards the loopholes, with fixed bayonets and grenades hooked on to their belts, to reply to the Boches pluckily. Gallant fellows!

*August 14.*

It is in these ravaged woods that, to-morrow, we are to celebrate the festival of August 15. Nobody, I believe, will be tempted to give way to excesses, and yet everybody will be cheerful, in good humour, and will live with joyous heart that day face to face with the Boches, who are there, quite close, watching us from behind their fire-bays. But we also have got our eye on them, and if they were tempted to leave their holes they would get a nice reception! This evening we shall have, as usual, a serenade with bombs and hand-grenades—a rather wild sort of music, but not lacking in picturesque-ness. Indeed, we are spending unforgettable hours here.

My arm continues to heal up and will be all right in a very few days.

*August 15.*

Here is an August 15 festival which hardly resembles that of preceding years! On the same day last year the war had started, but no one thought that a year later the guns would still be thundering. And

yet the struggle continues, more violent and tenacious than ever.

Whereas last year we had still the quietude of our little country house in Savoy, high mass in the ancient church, with its gilded wooden statues, among a crowd of thoughtful old men and women in Savoyard dress, and the merry chime of the bells rising from the verdure of the orchards, to-day we are attached to the patient labor of the great war. To celebrate this day, there are no longer either bells or songs or crowds in their Sunday best. Yet the scene is as meditative as in the Tarentaise village—nay, even more so. Amidst the austerity of this desolated wood, on the hardly contested slopes of these Alsatian Vosges, already steeped in the blood of so many fights, the soul rises of its own accord towards that infinite on which our hope is nurtured.

Notwithstanding the savage roar of all these engines of war, crouching like wild animals watching for their prey in the shady places of woods—notwithstanding the whistling of bullets, the heartrending aspect of these devastated mountains and the bitter nights—notwithstanding the cold, the blood, and death—notwithstanding everything, a superhuman peace reigns over this sad festival, and something stronger than ourselves descends into our souls to tell us that the worst events are nothing, that this life itself is only a threshold to be crossed, and that everything comes to it from elsewhere.

This morning, in a wretched shelter of stones and branches, a soldier-priest said mass for us, shells

shrieking the while in the grey sky. What fervour and poetry and value these masses, celebrated no matter where, on temporary altars, by soldiers and for soldiers, assume! The prayers we offer up at the tombs of comrades, killed the day or the night before, and in close proximity to that death which lies in wait for us every moment and may come upon us everywhere, are unforgettable.

We are still on those slopes of the Lingekopf which the mountain infantry won at the price of so many sacrifices, and which assume, at the thought of the many victims who fell there, a terrible and majestic grandeur, a singular melancholy.

From here, between the numerous openings among the pines, we command the Pass of W——, the shell-riddled hillocks which surround it, and the muddy cut-up meadows which descend from it to the basin of Orbey. Beyond, the horizon is hidden from view by the Hautes-Chaumes, a huge rounded barrier which hides from us the watershed of the Meurthe, the still French slopes of the Vosges. What innumerable times their pines will have echoed the din of the guns!

I am glad to have found my gallant *poilus* still in good spirits, notwithstanding the severities of this ever-on-the-alert existence, notwithstanding their virgin, torn or unstitched trousers, cold and earthy stews, diarrhoea, and the other inevitable little worries which go with this life of men-of-the-woods, led without cessation for so long a time.

*August 18.*

It is one o'clock in the afternoon. In a little

over an hour our guns are going to open fire on the German trench which lies above us, on the devastated crest of the Lingekopf, the greenish earth-bags of which we can see from our loop-holes. At six o'clock the artillery will cease firing. It will then be our turn, and we must ascend there, amidst cut-down trees, twisted barbed wire, and scattered rocks, to capture those enemy block-houses and stick there. We are ready. The men have filled their cartridge cases, hooked their tools on to their belts, filled their bags with grenades. They know where they are going. Awaiting the hour of departure, they converse, walk hither and thither with that coolness and confidence we shall never admire too much and to which we do not, perhaps, render sufficient justice.

May God watch over them and aid us!

*August 19.*

Fine weather, a radiant sky, an abundance of shells of all kinds, a fairly lively day. Nothing broken yet, in spite of the Boches.

*August 20.*

As I told you, it was the day before yesterday, the 18th, we played our part. I had asked for as thorough an artillery preparation as possible. The gunners responded to this wish and prepared the job in a masterly manner. From 3 until 6 p.m. the Boche block-house and trench which crown the Lingekopf shook under the 65's, the

75's, and the terrible shells of the Rimalho guns.

At six o'clock, the 6th company, in line, set off to attack the devastated crest. With an emotion which you will easily imagine, I watched my courageous *pouilles*, laboriously clambering over boulders and other obstacles, and with their bayonets glittering and resolute, their waists encircled by a string of bombs, climb to the block-house, reach the summit, without receiving a rifle-shot, and pass over it. Another company followed behind, burdened with tools, gabions, and earth-bags to consolidate the conquered line immediately.

It was magnificent!

Alas! it was too much of a good thing. Hardly had the Boche line been occupied, hardly had the workers, protected by the bomb-throwers, begun to fill their gabions with earth when enemy shells, with mathematical precision, showered on the position, annihilating in a minute a section of the 4th company, of which one officer was killed and another wounded. At the same time two mines exploded under the trench and the block-house, projecting into the air gabions, earth-sacks, weapons, bits of blue stuff, and . . . human limbs!

Ten minutes afterwards the survivors of the two companies returned to the line of departure. A multitude of pointed helmets again appeared on the summit. Artillery barrage, a deafening uproar, angry calls at the telephone! I received orders to recommence the attack. But, to avoid a fresh and useless slaughter, I took the responsibility of not trying again. I have not repented of it for one minute.

And here we still are—the 11th Battalion in ruins, waiting with resignation to be relieved.

Poor 11th Battalion! I have about seventy men of the line left. This Lingekopf is indeed the tomb of the mountain-infantry.

*August 21.*

We are still on the Lingekopf. The Boches do not trouble us too much. I do not know when we shall be relieved. Our *poilus* are in tatters, with gaping boots, and trousers in a still more alarming condition. As to washing ourselves, that is quite out of the question. The men have not changed their linen for a month; and when it is not too cold they amuse themselves by hunting for lice. Their moral remains excellent; neither filth, nor vermin, nor rain, nor the Boches damp their good humour. What a spectacle if we returned to Gérardmer in daylight! Boche shells rain on our wood. We laugh at them. . . .

*August 22.*

Still a good deal of noise to-day. Our guns and theirs exchange indiscreet remarks at our expense; but where we are there falls hardly anything save shrapnel from the 77's, and that is not very troublesome. With such solid shelters as we have, it does us very little harm.

LINGEKOPF,  
*August 25.*

A piece of good news: we are to be relieved to-

morrow evening; and of that no one will complain. The poor fellows of the 11th Battalion have indeed need to wash *their* linen after having washed this linen.<sup>1</sup> But they do not complain; they crack jokes on the subject of their vermin.

A year ago this morning we arrived at Saint-Dié. I can distinctly call to mind the station platform encumbered with lorries, packing cases, heaps of bread, and also forgotten luggage. In the town there was a continual coming and going of batteries, convoys, ambulances. Everything gave an impression of sadness, harassment, disquietude.

We were at the beginning of the drama. That dreadful thing which up to then we had conceived only in our minds was to become a reality; it was there quite close, and it was not a dream. . . .

In the evening we went to the outposts on the plateau of Dijon. The livelong day we saw march past us on the road which descends towards Saint-Dié a stream of peasants, women, wounded. . . .

Horrible recollection!

The next day, the same sinister procession, the same heart-rending refrain repeated by all these fugitives, marching alone, one by one, lamentably.

Hardly any officers! The majority doubtless were killed, or else holding out until the last gasp.

The day after the morrow came the order to attack, the engagement in the woods, the never-to-be-forgotten and bloody baptism of fire. Never have I been able to live again, in thought and memory, those tragic

<sup>1</sup> A play, in the French, on the word *linge*: "On besoin d'aller laver leur linge, après avoir lavé celui-là," that is, the Lingekopf.—Translator's note.

hours without experiencing a keen emotion made up of pity, terror and bitterness. To think that war is like that!—that France has experienced such days as those!

How distant we are to-day from those sad scenes!

Without a doubt, those who fell by thousands on the many battlefields of the early days of the war will not come to life again. Their loss remains. But grief is now assuaged; our trials are softened by hope. Henceforth, every one knows that he must suffer, and has cultivated his energy to bear suffering. The hard lesson of sacrifice will have opened many eyes. Who knows but that salvation would have come immediately if no one had not remained blind?

But we accommodate ourselves to everything—even to trial; and we must beware of insensibly returning, amidst the misfortunes of this war, to the abominable egoism from which it rudely dragged us. Man is a foul beast—nay perhaps the only really dangerous animal in creation, and needs to be treated roughly, to receive terrible lessons. I recall a line by De Vigny of which we were fond when students in rhetoric:

Sacrifice, toi seul es la vertu.<sup>1</sup>

I often ask myself what merit we possess—we who, cheaply, are the heroes of the moment. We are here like others are elsewhere because an established order has placed us here. People suppose that we are usually unhappy and gratuitously admire us, as though what we did was superhuman. No,

<sup>1</sup> Sacrifice, thou alone art virtue.

indeed! all men are alike and differ one from the other only in degree. The measure of the efforts of which they are capable depends above all on the means placed at their disposal. The only real merit one can possess is to accept one's lot as it comes, and to apply oneself, every minute, to doing as much good as possible.

It is not by results that the value of action must be judged, in the same way that the gravity of an error must not be judged by either the magnitude or the nature of the crime. The unconscious egoist who condemns a ruffian is not necessarily better than he is. Human justice is without doubt a necessary convention, but arbitrary like all the laws and rules men enact. The only tribunal is that of Conscience, and God alone is the judge.

Must we, on that account, contend that we have a right to avoid the conditions of the society in which we are born, and to take up an attitude of proud revolt against the laws? A gross error. On the contrary, we must accept them like everything else which exists, whether it be the work of nature or that of man, because it is, in any case, the work of God. Only we must be aware of the relativity of everything human, recognize that it has only value when in function with something else, and not see the absolute elsewhere than where it exists.

But I do not know what is impelling me to discourse on commonplace topics. Everything is so simple and clear. It is really not worth while to complicate matters.

There is talk of leave being granted. You may

be certain that if that is possible I shall not have to be asked twice to go and see you. But I do not dare to place too much hope on it. . . .

*August 26.*

We arrived this morning at the rest-billets, after a night march. What bliss to be able to wash, bathe, rest, and fit oneself out with new things!

We are expecting shortly important reinforcements to fill all the holes left by recent weeks of fighting.

There is again talk of leave being granted and I am sending in my application. It would be a fine adventure if I were able to go and spend a few days with you.

*Telegram of August 28.*

I am leaving. Shall arrive to-morrow evening.

## AT THE CORCIEUX CAMP



## CHAPTER IX

### AT THE CORCIEUX CAMP

*To a friendly family*

GRENOBLE,  
*September 4, 1915.*

What emotions and melancholy recollections the scenes of this marvellous district evoke!

After those long months of absence, spent far from all these familiar, evocative, and peaceful horizons, it seems, on finding oneself again amidst these ever similar surroundings, as though the hours which elapsed over there were blotted out miraculously.

It is the privilege of landscapes which formerly received the impress of our souls to remain for us, amidst storm and stress, the eternally new image of home. And when we return, from however far off we perceive it, we recognize it at the first glance.

But how quickly they pass, these blessed days amidst the sweetness of the re-found home, these days one has desired so many times, so ardently, during the hours of one's nostalgic dreams! However, one must know how to get the benefit of them. Everything comes to an end . . . the war will also

come to an end . . . and the world too. Let us know how to cull the joys which God gives us, along the road.

GÉRARDMER,  
*September 8.*

A few hasty lines. I reached Gérardmer yesterday evening, after a long railway journey.

I am leaving at once to rejoin my battalion at P\_\_\_\_\_, 20 kilometres from Gérardmer. The supply of willingness is now renewed for a long time.

*September 10.*

What a magnificent evening! After a superb day, the sun has just disappeared behind the rampart of the Hautes-Chaumes. Not a cloud, not a speck on this illimitably limpid sky. On the shores of the Lac Noir, rippling between the steep grey granite slopes, one could easily imagine oneself far from the war, transported to a marvellous abode—to some enchanted country.

*September 11.*

The weather is so fine, the air so light, the sky so clear, and the view of this lake so marvellous, that I ask myself what more I could desire to-day. What admirable scenery surrounds us! From the wooden hut where I live, I can see the water, between the knotty and reddish branches of the pines, shimmering under the great mid-day sun. Under this almost vertical light, the trees cast no

shadow and the pines appear to mingle into a thick fleece.

You will realize that in this delightful spot we are in no way to be pitied, and all the less so because this hollow escapes the ever malevolent eye of the Boche observers, and consequently their shells—at least relatively, for the Boches never remain inactive. When you receive nothing from them, you may conclude they are planning a “dirty trick.” Now, here we do not remain without receiving anything: from time to time a stupid shell will unexpectedly make itself heard around the lake, striking at random, merely to remind us that the Boches have not forgotten us.

Thus, some charming little corners, sometimes quite near the most disputed ground (the Lingekopf is only a few hundred metres away as the crow flies), exist even in war-time. In spite of all the means of destruction we invent, there will always be beautiful things; and the injury we shall have done to nature will be insignificant compared to all the beauties which will survive.

### *September 12.*

Yesterday, on a splendid night, we suddenly left our Lac Noir camp. We descended to Plaimfaing, which we had left two days before, and reached the slumbering village at 2 a.m. This morning I was awakened by the sound of church bells, ringing a loud peal for mass, for it is Sunday.

The village, although close to the Bonhomme lines, has little suffered; but a few houses bear

the marks of shells on their walls. The manufactories are at work, and everybody lives as usual. The people of the district are honest in every sense of the word.

*September 14.*

Since yesterday morning we are installed at Corcieux, an ordinary little village similar to those scattered about these intricate valleys of the lower Vosges.

Corcieux is one of the chief aviation centres of the VIIth Army.

Every minute aeroplanes pass above the houses, rising to leave on reconnaissance, or vol-planing from the heavens with the characteristic interruptions of their motors, on their return from a flight over Alsace. There are many smart officers, some of them very well known.

I lodge at the parsonage; in a room of biblical simplicity and impressive capacity; it is big enough to manœuvre a company in.

During our stay here we are going to take big doses of exercise to reconstitute the battalion and convert the uncouth reinforcements they have given us into blue devils.<sup>1</sup>

For the race of mountain-infantry is dying out. Time and labour are needed to reconstitute last year's battalions. The old 11th—that which left Annecy on August 5, 1914—is long since exhausted.

<sup>1</sup> "Diables bleus,"—the popular generic term for the mountain-infantry, the famous *Chasseurs Alpins*. —Translator's note.

. . . It is a fatal law of this man-eating war. With the Boches, it is certainly the same.

CORCIEUX,

*September 19.*

A year ago, under the impulse of that miraculous victory of the Marne, people still thought that the war would quickly be over, and counted on the flight of the German troops to the Meuse, to the Rhine.

However, since then they have not moved.

One must be very stupid to moan and complain. We have been so near disaster that we can never congratulate ourselves enough at having been saved at the last minute. Those who find the time long and grow exasperated because victory does not appear in sight are very much in the wrong. It is not those who fight who do this. At the front we know only too well that victories are not won by fine words, or even by good intentions, but that patience and perseverance are above all necessary, because an effort is sterile unless it is continuous. You are doubtless acquainted with Abel Faivre's sally: to a down-hearted civilian who expresses his astonishment, almost indignation at our inability so far to pierce the German front, a wounded officer replies: "Evidently . . . we owe you our apologies!"

Patience must be well preached to all if we are not to hear the same complaints should the "big blow" in preparation not produce all the results expected. We must not place our reliance on

anything, or on anybody, except on God; but do as much as possible ourselves, without being concerned about the apparent uselessness of our efforts. We ought to tell ourselves over and over again that an effort is never useless, on condition we do not measure its efficaciousness by an effect fixed *a priori*. We are wrong always to work for *something*. Doubtless, we must choose for our activity goals that are not too far apart, give the right direction to and regulate what we do according to an idea or object; but we must recollect that effort is not to be valued merely by the fruit it bears, but that it possesses, in itself, a value and a virtue sufficiently high for us to esteem it without anything more. Let us confidently cast into the universal crucible whatever labour, or will-power, we can furnish; and then leave that mysterious chemistry to operate and bring forth from that mixture some precious matter, without our knowing the secret of that marvellous distillation. Do not let us impose our rules or desire on God, but become aware of our dependence.

Our liberty—that liberty which God Himself, said Bossuet, wished to respect—is certainly not harmed thereby, because that liberty cannot stretch beyond Him who gave it us. It comes from God, and yet some people would see its effect outreach God. . . .

The finest liberty is that which enables us to free ourselves from needs, desires, regrets, doubt—all those chains we ourselves have forged. We ought to live in the will of God, as a fish lives in water. Doubtless the fish is not free to live in the air, to soar like eagles,

or to run like a dog; only, it does not desire to do so, through ignorance. But within the limits of its conception, it possesses entire independence over its movements.

We also are relative, limited to our very poor means of knowledge. In this domain, of which our ignorance is the boundary, we are able to move about freely. What is peculiar to us is this: we realize our relativity; and our first proud impulse is to protest and revolt. "Why is the infinite which we guess, which we feel everywhere, on all sides, at the base of everything—why is it barred to us?" If, like the animals (and yet, are we able to speak for the animals?), we had no feeling of the absolute, we should live like them, content with the world we knew and perfect masters of our movements within the limits of that world. Only, we know that everything does not end at the horizon of our perceptions.

The whole merit of life is there: in an act of humility and faith. The greatest mind and the highest intelligence of this world will be esteemed, glorified, flattered; but there is more virtue in the humblest soul if it says once sincerely: "I believe."

But why return to all this? It is so simple when one has once felt it, it forces itself upon one so strongly, that it is unnecessary to repeat it. Moreover, words have never convinced anybody. Faith is like a great discovery; it suddenly springs from obscurity and instantly appears so simple that we ask ourselves how it is we have sought for it so long. All converts must have had this feeling.

So autumn is creeping upon us! The leaves are tinting, nights are drawing out; every morning a thick fog hangs over the damp meadows; and the sun appears only towards the middle of the morning.

My thoughts go back to the misty winter mornings at Lyons, to the enchanted autumns at Lonnes, and to all the recollections they comprise. The present we are living would indeed seem barren if innumerable bonds did not impart to it something of the past which it evokes.

Is that the reason why I love these fogs of the Vosges, and that the evenings appear to me so beautiful on the hills, veiled in shadow, where the autumn-tinted trees sing among the pines?

CORCIEUX,  
*September 23.*

To-day is the anniversary of the fight of Sidi-Brahim. As usual, we celebrated this corporate fête of the mountain-infantry: somewhat at the last moment, it is true. This morning a service was held in Corcieux Church in memory of the men of the 11th Battalion who died for France.

In the afternoon, sports and amusements, improvised by the men, were organized as well as possible—songs, dancing, sack races, greasy pole, etc. The fête finished with a great attraction: a race between all our little donkeys.

The evening of the day before yesterday I was able to go and spend a short time at Saint-Dié, where I saw Mgr. Foucault, who was very kind.

CORCIEUX,  
*September 24.*

Once more we come into contact here with the military profession as it was exercised and will continue to be exercised in garrisons. It is a strange way of employing one's life. One can understand the danger of a career in which one must be (out of war-time, of course) an apostle, a saint, an angel, a perfect being to perform one's duty completely. One's path is strewn with ruts. To avoid sinking into them, one must keep up the sacred fire of early days by means of constant attention and exactness.

From the enthusiasm and ardour which elevated the Saint-Cyrian the slope which leads to routine, indifference, laziness, negligence, narrowness of intellect and soul is very gentle and imperceptible. One is either vulgar or magnificent in this profession. An army officer, a leader of men, must above all be a character: his men must feel, almost instinctively, that he is some one to be respected; everything which proceeds from him, their leader—orders, acts, gestures, or words, nay even attitude—must bear the mark of moral superiority and elevation of mind. Moreover, he must know how to be as kind as possible. With us, in France, we do more through kindness than through fear, more by example than by instruction. All this is difficult when one takes one's part seriously, and to devote one's whole soul to it is not too much. In this sense, there is perhaps no vocation, apart from the priesthood, which opens so wide a field.

But side by side with this ideal, understood more

or less by everybody but attained by nobody, what mediocrities must be avoided, what narrowness and meanness are to be feared! One needs a character of the highest order, when circumstances are unfavourable, to remain equal to one's part; and I believe that an officer, if he has been able to play this part for years in barracks, will have no difficulty in being a hero on the battlefield. There is no great merit and not much difficulty in conducting oneself well on exceptional occasions; but it is very hard and meritorious to perform one's ordinary humble daily duties well. It is the same everywhere. A thought in the *Imitation* expresses it: "He that escheweth not small faults little by little shall slide into greater."

*September 27.*

Has the breach been made?—the great breach?—the real breach? . . . Twenty thousand prisoners is quite good for a start. What an event! What joy there would be if, one of these mornings, we were told of the flight of the Boches along the whole line! . . . Do not let us count on it too hastily. Let us be patient, calm, and confident; let us hope, for we must always hope; and then let us wait, praying to God to save France.

We have been on the alert since yesterday, ready to set off at the first signal. Should this signal be given, it will be a good sign. So let us set off heartily. Just think of it; the enemy's lines are pierced! . . .

The days grow shorter and shorter. The oaks and beeches are turning red on the hills and form

yellowish-brown splashes amidst the unchangeable black foliage of the pines; the fruit is ripening and the apples are falling in the orchards; whilst under the storm-shaken chestnut trees the ground is littered with green spiked shells and parti-coloured chestnuts.

I recollect, with that remarkable clearness which the most insignificant memories of childhood retain, the interest aroused in us, in the garden of the Rue des Alpes, by these tender chestnuts, which, because of their brown and white skins, we called "cows." Thus are commonplace images impressed on our minds, and, without our knowing why, everything they evoke thus assumes a peculiar charm and sweetness. How true it is that we encounter ourselves everywhere! Truly, it is not objects we love: it is ourselves we love through these objects.

Yesterday, to keep some comrades company, I went as far as Saint-Dié, where I had the pleasant surprise to meet Jacques Delorme, who is in sound condition, both morally and physically. I passed those places which are so full of the tragic recollection of last year: Taintrux, Rougiville, Les Moitresses, and La Bolle. The town is cheerful and animated. The inhabitants appear to trouble themselves very little over the war, or at any rate see in it only an adventure which was worth experiencing. Morals and life there seem light and easy. War, which brings in its train so much care and mourning, also breeds a good deal of heedlessness. One would think that the proximity of danger and death impels people to love life for itself and to demand of it, without control, everything it can bestow. This is not, as I know, peculiar

to one place, or to one epoch; and we must not be over-astonished at it.

*September 29.*

Rain, the tedious persistent rain of autumn, deluges our sky. Huge grey cloud-drift scuds from one end of the horizon to the other, similar to a dark river which flows heavily and incessantly, submerging the rounded summits of the totally black hills and bearing sinister eddies along with it to the sides of the flooded slopes.

The cloud-waves follow one on the other endlessly; they race along, roar behind the lines of pines, cross the sky in a long mournful procession to the distant portals, through which they pass, one by one, with the same continuous movement.

Poor fellows, those who are fighting in Champagne or in Artois, if they have weather like this! The rain and the mud, the slippery ground and the cold are so many more obstacles to be added to so many others; so many more enemies to be conquered at the same time as the Boches. Whereas we, at least, possess roofs over our heads, our brothers over there confront at one and the same time the greatest dangers and the cruelty of this wretched day. It is asking a good deal of their valour; but not too much. It is never too much when one has the will-power to reach the goal at all cost, and when the stake is worth that price.

Moreover, we judge the difficulty and grandeur of sacrifice from a distance. When we ourselves are in the storm we have less leisure to consider the risks or difficulties of it; we are not spectators but actors,

and that is very different. Assuredly, it is much better to live in this way outside ourselves; for it is only then that we can give ourselves up to our work whole-heartedly. If fear of the task to be accomplished should flash across the mind, this other thought follows immediately, as a reply to every fear of weakness: "if my strength is insufficient for the effort, death will relieve me of the impossible." This idea is perhaps cowardly, but very often we need more courage to live in spite of everything than to accept a liberating death. But I know, for my part, that it has come to me sometimes of its own accord, so to speak, as the spontaneous protest of animal instinct for which life does not extend beyond certain possibilities. What a strange amalgam we are!

But, in reality, reasoning is very summary on the battlefield. You march forward with one or two fixed ideas: that of advancing towards or reaching a definite point. Other ideas momentarily cross that one, like flashes; or else images take shape, coming we cannot say by what chance from the obscure depths of memory, and immediately fade away. At other times—and who has not experienced this?—a melodious air or the rhythm of a verse obsesses you, obstinately jingling like a small bell. All this is strange, incoherent, difficult to explain.

CORCIEUX,  
*October 4.*

Under a uniformly grey sky and in drizzling rain, we have just paid honour to the flag of the moun-

tain-infantry, which Colonel Passaga came to present to us. Much glory is hidden in the folds of that faded piece of silk; many unknown acts of heroism and many lives have been offered for the ideal of which this piece of stuff is at once the golden book and the symbol. The cross of the Legion of Honour and the military medal, hanging from the staff, sum up everything which constitutes the pride and renown of the *Chasseurs Alpins*.

Several decorations were presented. The fanion of the 6th company—my fanion—received the *Croix de guerre* with the star for a mention in the army orders of the 2nd brigade of mountain-infantry, commemorative of the Lingekopf, August 18.

*October 5.*

I write to you from Frais, a big hamlet of ten houses; for we have removed . . .

We arrived this morning at Belfort, and left a few minutes later to come and take up our quarters in these two little villages of Fontaine and Frais, almost on the former frontier of the Upper Rhine.

And what are we going to do now?

I am not in a position to say, and it is not surprising we are left in ignorance.

I know not why this dull day, these veiled horizons, these red leaves, this misty sky particularly carry my thoughts back to the autumn landscapes so long, so profoundly admired and loved, at the same season, in that dear district of Llonnes, in the happy years of the past.

What magic evocative power, what wealth of

emotion and tenderness is concealed, then, in this mysterious season of autumn? Why do the smallest objects, the most ordinary and simple images acquire, through the mere mirage of the moment, those marvellous and enrapturing features of which the memory afterwards preserves an indelible impress? That is the secret of nature—that nature which remains for all the school of beauty. And that is also, doubtless, the design of the Maker, who desires to reveal Himself by His works to those who know, or are able to perceive the light only by its reflections.

Formerly, I thought that to each individual only one form of landscape was suited and expressive: that the Savoyard or inhabitant of Dauphiny understood his mountains and despised the lowlands, as the sailor loves the ocean and disregards the Alps; that there was, in this love and worship of the soil something like an involuntary prejudice, similar to that we so easily display in our judgments. But I no longer believe this. In this great open book, in which every one by himself can learn to read, there is no dead letter for anybody. It suffices, according to the classic formula, “to go to the truth with all one’s soul” to feel oneself vibrate in unison with the divine harmonies. In that universal vibration, the soul moves with the same freedom as a fish in the sea, or an eagle in the sky; it seems as though we formed part of that universe, of which we are but atoms. Nevertheless . . . man’s pride is so violent that he readily considers everything surrounding him as a world subjected to his caprices. The most insignificant particle of this illimitable universe, he claims

to dominate, encompass, fathom it. Let him consider then his weakness, the brevity of his life, and his powerlessness to modify the smallest detail of that evolution.

Where am I? On the damp moss, on the margin of the peaceful pool of Fromenteau? Among the solemn oaks of Fontaine-Froide? On the bare rocks of the peaks of the Oisans? No!—only, the imagination, long encaged, sometimes escapes; it flies away quickly, so quickly that it has covered leagues and years at a single bound. Let us put it back in its cage, for it is getting late. We will see to-morrow if we can grant it another little flight.

*October 8.*

Once more we have changed our residence. Since yesterday we are in respectable trenches, more than a year old, and which wind across the plains of Alsace. No more mountains, no more pines, no more swampy valleys, as in the Vosges! Here everything is spread out. The horizon is only blocked out by the outskirts of a wood, and by a succession of hedges, houses, or roadside banks. The ground is not uneven; nor is it quite flat; but the undulations which give it life are so ample, so faintly outlined, that the eye hardly succeeds in taking them in at a glance and mingles them in a single expanse.

There now!—they have just called me to the telephone to tell me that we must be in readiness to be relieved here at the end of the afternoon. The last few days we have decidedly been living a life of expectation.

Come what may and whatever destiny may be in store for us, let us entrust ourselves to the hands of God and do, always and everywhere, the least ill we can. The rest depends not on us.

Therefore, let us face all possibilities with the same equanimity; let us accept in advance what will happen, convinced that we shall ever find an opportunity of acting well. No desires, no regrets, is the motto of wisdom.

*October 14.*

A marvellous autumn twilight! What tender evocations, indelible images, recollections and sweet-ness the sight of these freshly-ploughed fields, these russet woods, and purple swamps summon to the mind!

We have just returned to our quarters after a long and delightful excursion across the fields. This is no longer warfare, but poetry and happiness in move-ment. Frightened hares, partridges in whirring, arched coveys fled before us, surprised by our intrusion into their domain, which the war has respected since the autumn before last.

We leave to-morrow and entrain at Belfort in the evening, bound for Gérardmer. Doubtless we are re-turning to our old sector or elsewhere. . . .

*October 17.*

We are again attached to sector. . . .

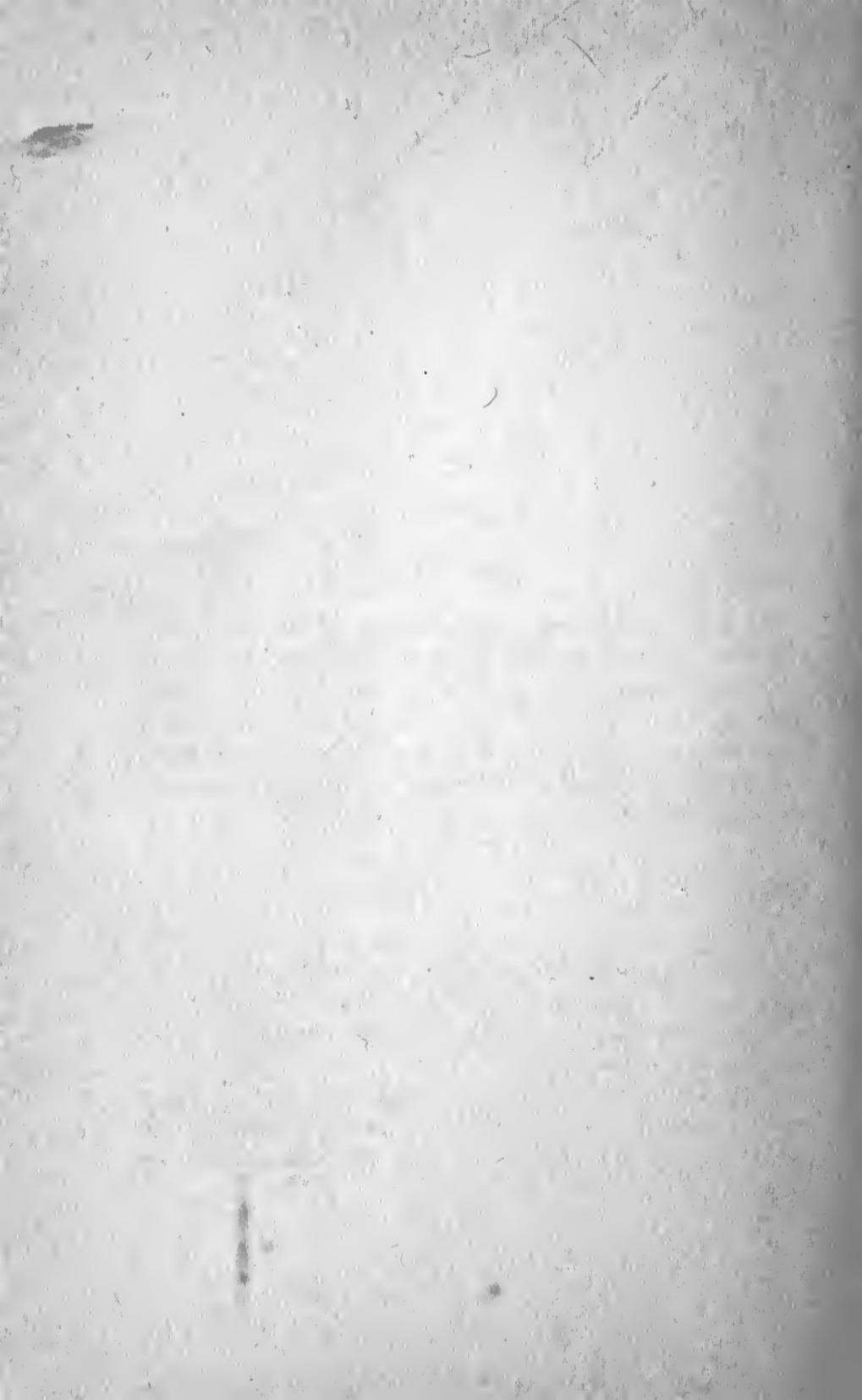
One more quiet day are we spending in this little town of Gérardmer, which has become, as it were, our resting-place. Still a good deal of animation.

This afternoon the band is giving a grand concert at the bandstand. All Gérardmer has arranged to be there.

We shall probably leave the day after to-morrow for the Schratzmaennelé, where the Boches have been displaying an ill-omened activity for some time.

We shall set out courageously, notwithstanding our recollection of the sanguinary days of August. Some one must hold this sector; and if it is more difficult to hold than others, it is an honour for those sent there. I shall be glad if I can meet up there Major de Reyniès. He is one of those who have neither disappointed our hopes nor fallen in the esteem of all those who knew him before the war.

## THE LAST STAGE



## CHAPTER X

### THE LAST STAGE

*October 19.*

We have just arrived at the camp of H——, in the midst of the woods. We knew this little nook during the long days of June; now we find it wholly saturated with autumn. Candles have to be lit at an early hour in the shelters, which we are already thinking of warming. To-morrow we shall go to the trenches, and doubtless remain for a long time.

*October 20.*

A very quiet day for our return to trench life. The Boches are quite near; but are frightened of us, although we have exchanged our *bérets* for steel helmets. They seem to be anxious to avoid bringing trouble on themselves.

I heard the day before yesterday that I have been awarded the Legion of Honour. It gave me great pleasure to think of the joy this would be to you.

*October 21, from the trenches.*

Here we are, since last night, crouching in the dens of the Schratzmaennelé, not far from the Lingekopf, which is but a spur of the same mountain-chain. They are indeed dens which shelter us—veritable caverns excavated four to five metres underground, and which the German *marmites* would find a difficulty in destroying.

I have had the pleasure to receive here that fine type of French officer—Major de Reyniès. The war has aged him; but only the more prominent features of his face and grizzled hair bear the impress of age.

His look, as keen and true as a sword, and the noble expression of his face display, on the contrary, the still youthful vigour of this finely tempered mind, which escapes the wear and tear of time like choice steel resists the action of rust.

There is something comforting in meeting such men, whose very presence is beneficial, and whose hand-shake is eloquent. I can understand the attachment retained for him by all who have come into close relations with him. He is one of the examples of that old French race whose sons—born soldiers—remain amidst our faithless society the apostles and priests of the cult of one's native land. I recollect yesterday, on seeing him, so simple and open in his manner, so tall in the partial shadow of his dugout, the impression he made on us, a few years ago, when we joined his company and he delivered to us little unassuming lectures on the flag, France, and its history. Whence comes that mysterious bond which attaches us to certain beings in such a way that, after

having known and frequented their company but a short time, and then having long remained without seeing them, their unexpected reappearance immediately places us in an atmosphere of sympathy, friendship and confidence?

*October 22.*

I have just arisen after taking a few hours sleep on a little couch arranged in a corner of the dugout. Every modern comfort is here: dining-room, which also serves as an office; and next to it a bedroom, in subterranean communication with the room of the *agents de liaison* and the telephone cabin, so that this mole-hill possesses two exits, which may simply save our lives in case one of the two is obstructed by a shell.

*October 26.*

The whole of the Schratz is enveloped in a dense motionless fog, in the midst of which the branchless trunks of the pines rise like mortuary candles. What a strange world, difficult to imagine in the case of any one who has not seen it, and of which no other can give an idea! This insignificant mountain, similar to all those around, and which would certainly have remained unknown and deserted, has become something indefinable that war, that this war alone can realize. It is neither a fortress, nor a bivouac, nor a haunt of troglodytes, nor a wood, nor a quarry, but at one and the same time all that, and yet something else, partaking of the fantastic as much as of the picturesque. Here indeed is life for those who desire

it! Here is a novelty—something never seen before;—an adventure that no one would have dreamt of if circumstances had not created it.

*October 27.*

This morning, on leaving my lair, I found the ground frozen and the air keen. The mighty summit of the Hautes-Chaumes opposite us was all white. This is the first and timid forerunner of winter, which is slowly creeping on and which we shall soon experience—harsh and magnificent—in these Vosges, which become more fierce to receive it.

I expect new, penetrating, and thoughtful impressions to result from the long winter we shall doubtless spend in this district. Blockaded by the severity of the season, we shall live weeks of an existence so different from that which is normally led by men of the twentieth century that some ineffaceable impress must remain on us.

*October 31.*

It is almost a year since I learnt—in a letter from papa, dated October 26—of Jean's death. The year which has gone by since that sorrowful evening has most certainly been an endless joy for our Jean; and, notwithstanding the sadness of this anniversary, we must not let our inevitable bitterness prevent us from recognizing the supreme good attained by him. Between the levity and indifference which make a careless life and the excessive anxiety of those who extend

the field of emotions inordinately, there must be room for a golden mean, in which sensibility is at once living and contained, capable of feeling everything, but controlled and moderated by clear-sighted confidence.

I have just been interrupted by a curious incident. The Boches who occupy the geographical summit of the Schratz, only a short distance from our lines, have thrown a cardboard box, weighted with a stone, into our trench. The box bore a luggage label with the address of a Boche soldier. This address was carefully written, but on the exterior of one side of the box were scrawled in big letters with a blue pencil these words: "Hast du kein kugel mehr?"—"Have you no more bullets?" The explanation of this uncommon message is simple. In the afternoon some men of the sector nearest to the Boches amused themselves (they amuse themselves as best they can!) by sending stones to these gentlemen by means of slings, made of a piece of canvas and two strings. The Teutons wished to reply to this delicate attention. As they generally sent us bombs or grenades, this abnormal object excited the highest interest and curiosity among the men, who hastened to bring it to me.

As one politeness calls for another, I sent back the same box full of French newspapers, relating to our recent victories in Champagne, and added to them a note on which I wrote in German: "Just come and you'll see whether the French have any more bullets for Germans!"—and underneath: "Long live France!" If this little game amuses them, I propose to correspond as often as possible by sending papers

rolled around stones. We amuse ourselves the best way we can at the Schratz!

*November 1.*

This morning, in reply to an invitation sent by telephone, I went to hear mass. Quite so!—we had the All Saints' mass at the Schratz. It was in the bowels of the mountain, in the depths of the cavern which the captain who commands the *groupe de combat* inhabits, a hundred metres lower down than here; it was in the silence and security of this unlooked-for refuge that the Abbé Darlier, the young divisionary chaplain, celebrated the mass for the small number of true believers whom this novel temple could receive.

If I had been a painter, or if I had known how to depict with a few pencil strokes the most striking episodes of the campaign, I should not have failed to record that most original and touching scene: “The Catacombs of the Schratzmaennelé.” It does one good, amidst the inevitable monotony of our dull existence, to meet again in so original a frame the ancient practices of that religion which, when quite little, we learnt to love before we understood its meaning and experienced its blessings. And I need hardly tell you that this morning, during that mass celebrated so near the front, in the very soil of those mountains on which so much blood has been shed, and which still keep the secret of so many obscurely heroic martyrs, I thought of the two heroes, of the two martyrs whose presence was, there, more perceptible than at any other hour and any other place.

Have they not a right to special reverence, they and all their equals, all those who died for the flag and a belief—have they not a right, like the martyrs of ancient Rome, to be prayed to and invoked with the other saints, on this day of the festival of all the saints?

*November 4.*

It was this morning, in fine, clear, cool weather, before my company assembled under the pines of Malwen-Wald, that I was consecrated a knight of the Legion of Honour.

At the bottom of the valley, hidden under the dark cloak of the forest, the 75's uttered, in slow salvos, their triumphant notes. A German aeroplane, pursued by a series of white shrapnel, flew across the blue with all possible swiftness. No crowd, no gallery, no one else present except the men—my friends and to a certain extent my children, presenting arms with my green and yellow fanion in the centre of the square; no other display than that border of pine-trees and the light clouds in the sky; no other music than that of the guns.

No *mise-en-scène*, no parade would have moved me more; and if I had had to choose the circumstances, I should not have wished them to be different. And yet I was almost ashamed on finding myself in the midst of that little company, stiff and attentive around me; I seemed to occupy a position which was not made for me, to be assuming an honour that was not my due. It was not for that that

I left for the war. I fear that I may feel, afterwards, the ambition of that which has happened apart from myself. Let hard-won and gloriously reaped laurels be given to others! Chance—Providence has permitted me to reach this day without injury and without having experienced any great difficulty. Others have merited and paid for the palm I bear away; and how many have remained in obscurity—humble, unrecognized, sacrificed, ignored! How many have disappeared without a complaint, without any one witnessing their sacrifice, without a halo of glory!

Yes, amidst the emotion aroused by this overwhelming honour, I feel the bitterness of so much neglect like remorse, and experience as it were the feeling of an injustice. Poor fellows, poor youngsters who fell among the pine-woods of Alsace, on the plains of the North or of Flanders!—poor little *chasseurs!* Of what importance to you, and of what importance to those who weep for you in the cottages of Savoy, is this red ribbon which you have dyed with your blood? The heroes—where are they? They have neither stripes nor medals; they are invisible and innumerable. Every day they silently repeat their admirable sacrifice. Nobody looks at them, nor loves them; they believe so at least because they cannot guess. It is necessary to go, so they go; it is necessary to suffer, so they suffer; they are wounded and die; their bodies are sometimes abandoned, lost, annihilated; no one is there to see, to know, to understand. And later, when they have thus heaped up mountains of devotion and sacrifice, a privileged person of rank or some

one favoured by chance receives the price of their innumerable efforts.

Have not Jean and Joseph each done a hundred-fold more and merited a hundredfold better than myself?

That is why this day, which brings us such great pride and honour, also weighs upon me like a fault. No, not like a fault; for I know that justice among men is but a convention of a code and that the real judgments are delivered elsewhere.

To be decorated so near All Saints' Day—what an insignificant incident! How commonplace this enamelled cross seems compared with the rude crosses, made of two pine branches, which open their arms above the tombs! . . . You speak of glory? But it is not I who receive it to-day; it is for them. Certainly they envy me nothing; and that thought comforts me. To every one according to his merit. Their happiness above is incomparable. By that standard, the proportion is certainly more accurate.

My greatest pleasure (and this I accord myself unreservedly) is to think that what has happened to me may give you pleasure. This honour results from you. All the good I possess comes from you. Whatever distinction is granted me, I owe it to you. Such accounts as these the world does not keep; the world is short-sighted and does not look beneath the surface; but God knows. May He grant you what the homage of the world cannot give you. As long as I live I shall not cease to ask Him to guide me, so that, as far as in me lies, I may give you satisfaction; and I am well aware that I shall always lag behind.

*November 5.*

This is our last day of rest at Malwen-Wald. Tomorrow, at dawn, we shall return to our post at the Schratz.

Yesterday evening the gallant *poilus* of the company gave me a delightful surprise. At about seven o'clock, just as we were sitting down at table, we heard the strains of the *Sidi-Brahim* coming from the threshold of the hut; a chorus of *chasseurs* of the 6th company who had come in the darkness and coldness of the night to execute a serenade in my honour. They sang the *Sidi-Brahim* and a few couplets of their patriotic songs, and concluded by shouting: "Long live Captain Belmont!" Fine fellows! You will realize how touched I was by their demonstration. Man's gratitude and affection are the best of rewards. No price can be set on such an offering.

*November 6.*

Mud, snow, fog—that is what we found this morning when we came and took possession again of the Schratz—"our Schratz." We now feel that we are in a familiar district when, after four days in the second line, we return to our high-perched country residence. The summit of the Schratz, from which we are not more than fifty metres distant, has an altitude of a thousand metres, so it is not astonishing that snow has made its appearance.

The shattered trunks of the pines, seen through the fog, evoke the mournful stelæ of a necropolis.

That terrible Lingekopf is indeed a cemetery; and no one will ever know how many sleep their last sleep there under the stones, the débris, the heaped-up earth, and shattered shelters—those whom no one will exhume.

From time to time, in the course of digging a sap, the pick-axe unearths a buried corpse. We do not always succeed in discovering whether it is that of a German or that of a Frenchman—it is nothing more than rottenness, an unnameable thing. Nevertheless, sometimes we still try to find out who it is. In defiance of our repugnance, we succeed in rescuing a paper, a letter, a military memorandum-book. Who will do this afterwards? we ask ourselves. And the thought of all the anguish born of uncertainty aids us to make the necessary effort. The veneration of the dead and care for their tombs are feelings which the war has greatly developed. Spontaneously, the men honour, wherever they can, the remains of their comrades who have died for France. The horrible work they sometimes have to accomplish on these devastated expanses thus assumes a veritable grandeur and superior nobility. In their application, in the care they take in this sad labour, there is something more than the accomplishment of an ordinary duty which hygiene or health suffice to order; there is the simple and profound faith that springs from the ancestral soul—the evangelical tenderness of mortal man for a fellow-creature; there is also, perhaps, a vague consciousness of the tacit delegation established between the men and the families of their comrades. “He came from my native place—he was a comrade.”

They can afterwards tell the family that they did what they could, and indicate the spot where the tomb is to be found.

Every one does this naturally, knowing that his neighbour was struck down to-day, but that perhaps to-morrow it will be his turn; and that the survivors will similarly be anxious to venerate his remains; as he did for the others. It is not incorrect to say that these men grouped before the enemy and danger form a veritable family and consider themselves bound to each other by brotherly duties. They are indeed brothers in arms. This is one more of the salutary signs of our ordeal inasmuch as it teaches those who pass through it in common the duties of charity: "Love thy neighbour as thyself." Suffering is the antidote for egoism, and the school of that most magnificent of all virtues: kindness. You find this thought expressed everywhere; it springs in one form or another from every sincere soul. "Nothing makes you so great as a great sorrow," said Musset. Vigny—more anxious—replied: "Sacrifice, thou alone art virtue." Therefore we must welcome suffering, not merely as a necessity, like fatalists, but as a blessing, like believers.

But every one agrees to that; nobody can deny the value of a heartily welcomed ordeal, nor the quality of the characters tempered by trial. Only, it is not enough to be convinced of this, one must also be capable, when the time comes, of upholding this conviction. It would be too easy to be perfect if all one had got to do was to be able to distinguish between good and evil. Better be a wise man without

knowing it. True merit is unconscious, knows not itself; and often also is unknown. It has renounced all honours and the world's consideration beforehand; and the world does not give that for which it does not ask.

It seems to me that a man receives during his life very much what he desires. Would he be regarded with consideration, be flattered and glorified? That coin is not the rarest, and if he consents to beg for it people will not be niggardly. If he flatters, he will be flattered. Would he, on the contrary—disdainful of the months of fame—direct his life towards an ideal? Then the world will disdain him—injure him completely if necessary. The world's judgment is in no case a criterion. If one would find the finest characters and the noblest hearts, one must not address oneself to the world's opinion: seek for them rather in the shadow, in the gutter, amidst the humble surroundings of simple duties and unobtrusive tasks. One must be attentive, patient, indifferent to all rumours, insensible to all outward show to be able, in the long run, to distinguish noble souls. But, unless one is mistaken, one's esteem and admiration grow daily. Thus ought we to direct our choice in friendship and marriage.

*November 10.*

Stern and howling autumn has indeed visited us to-day. This is the period of the year when people begin to live in houses and keep to the fire-side. This boisterous rainy weather is detestable in the

towns because it disfigures everything and makes the streets insupportable. In the country, similar days have already something dramatic and startling about them.

The mighty oaks of Fontaine-Froide must be groaning sinisterly, and on the ruffled waters of the solitary pools all the leaves of the water-lilies like black disks must be heaving. Flocks of starlings must be passing in clouds on a level with the brown earth, and the ring-doves, ample in their flight, are doubtless sweeping over the tops of the yellowish-brown trees, carried along by the wind. It is good then, after a walk or shooting excursion, to return to the fragrant warmth of the room where a good wood-fire roars. Ah! what pleasant moments we experienced yonder, in the old family home, when we spent there the blessed peaceful autumns of former years! . . .

It does one good, now, to evoke the recollection of that joyful intimacy.

#### *November 12.*

Wretched weather! Down in the depths of our subterranean shelter, we can hear, like a stifled wail, the moaning of the wind, which at times grows louder, then seems to subside, rises again, and rushes past incessantly, making the few remaining branches of the pines spared by the shells vibrate like the cords of a double bass. The landscape is sinister and mournful. In this torn-up ground, strewn with débris and wreckage, in this perspective of decapitated trees, in this mud, in this furious

ind, in this gloomy panorama where everything roclaims ruin and destruction, and in that impression of a perpetual menace which obstinately rises from this landscape where invisible man is to be guessed among the desolation—in all this there could indeed be sufficient to drive one mad if one were not already long familiarized with the fantastic and the strange. What more do these people want who deplored the monotony and platitude of existence, who clamoured for novelty and adventures, and who exasperated this craving for the *inédit* to the point of torture? Here is something which ought to satisfy them; and, unless they were able to realize Dante's epic dream, or renew the relations of our positive world with the divinities of ancient mythology, I do not know whether they could, between their birth and death, embrace anything which could better respond to their arrogant desire to live their lives.

And yet I have long since been struck by the little cheerfulness shown by those very individuals who revolted the most noisily against the tameness of existence. On the contrary, it is very often these, the impatient ones of old, who the least willingly accommodate themselves to their uprooting and who aspire, more or less ostentatiously, to recover the narrow sphere of a middle-class, comfortable egoism.

Nevertheless, one must not be unjust. If there are some who accept this rôle as epic heroes reluctantly, many, faithful to their Gallic blood, reveal themselves to others and to themselves, and awaken under the influence of these heroic days as though

by magic; the profound sap within them rises like that of vigorous trees when spring drags them from their torpor.

What do many people need to enable them to become true men? Merely an atmosphere, certain surroundings, a concurrence of circumstances which will apply that constraint upon them which, through inertness, indifference and routine, they neglected to exercise by themselves. Here, again, calamities like the war are blessings. How they shake off idleness and awaken energy, and what latent germs they fecundate!

For the great labours of little epochs we are worth nothing: our soul is insufficiently lofty, our will insufficiently curtailed for that. And, one might believe, as our enemies believed, that we are self-made men, weak and cowardly, incapable of resilience. It is in this sense that people were able to say that this war was, on the part of the Germans, an error in psychology; only, it wanted but little for events to decide in their favour, despite their error in psychology; which proves how fatal it is to be lulled into the false security of thoughtlessness, in spite of all the hope we may rightly place on our secret resources.

It is the victory of the Marne which gives us our fine self-confidence and enables us to treat the Boches, disdainfully, as blunderers; but to what was that victory due? "God helps those who help themselves." We escaped disaster thanks to God, and inadvertently. But if we had patiently maintained, since the disastrous war of 1870, the effort and unity of the nation, who knows whether this war would

not have long since ended gloriously? It is more probable that it would never have broken out. "If you desire peace," says the wisdom of nations, "prepare for war."

But what is the good of reasoning about a fact which everybody now vie with each other to repeat? We shall ever be the same: men of genius following their own fancy, incorrigible chatterers, hair-splitting critics, individualists—I know not what! Our race will not change; nor, moreover, is that necessary. A child's education does not consist in violating its nature by imposing a rigid mould upon it, but in studying it with the object of afterwards putting it in the right direction. It is not a harmful weed that must be ruthlessly hoed up, but a wild plant that must be pruned, grafted, trained. France is an eternal child; one can neither hope nor wish that the lesson of the events through which it passes will transform its tastes or its affinities; it suffices if it directs their course and disciplines them. Let us retain, if necessary, the defects of our qualities rather than lose these qualities themselves, but on condition that the good qualities dominates and the bad ones are the inevitable exception. And let us confess to ourselves that, on the other hand, the Boches possess the qualities of their defects: strength with pride, submissiveness with stupidity, application with sluggishness. Because we have experienced the effect of that strength, discipline and method, do not let us be deceived, but know how to see them synthetically, as they are: big, strong and stupid. Upon the whole, I prefer to be a Frenchman.

*November 14.*

It was amidst the immaculate whiteness of snow that we left our second-line shelters to return to our trenches on the Schratz. It was not a long journey: two or three hundred metres of ascending communication trenches along which one slowly proceeds, knocking oneself against the stones, roots and damp earth which form their sides. These trenches are the nightmare of this insidious war, in which one must constantly keep oneself hidden. What a relief when we are able to walk in the open air, upright, to fill our lungs with the air of open spaces, to gaze into the distance, on all sides, to live in broad daylight, with our heads on high and freedom for our limbs! The irksome and tyrannical communication trench is the slough of the soldier of to-day; the daily contribution which buys salvation; the small sacrifice, accepted a thousand times, which is worthy some day of apotheosis. Thus, as ever, the humble indefatigable task triumphs where the mighty effort of a single day would be shattered to no purpose. "He that escheweth not small faults little by little shall slide into greater."

It snows—snows incessantly. Outside, myriads of white flakes chase each other, fly and dance in the air, swirl round in an incessant saraband, driven by the wind which urges them on like an army to the attack of impassable summits.

A short time ago I was on the summit of the Schratz. The storm was so heavy up there, drove the stinging snow-flakes so violently against my face, that I was unable to open my eyes and had to hang on to the parados to be able to keep my feet.

There's a means of stirring the blood and bringing colour to the cheeks of the palest! It does one good, after crouching for hours in one's hole, to get out and offer oneself to that rude but fresh and vivifying caress.

Unfortunately, everything is not so magnificent, and this first fall of soft snow has resulted in suddenly impregnating with water the very permeable sandy or rocky soil of which this mountain is composed; and so in the saps, underground, infiltrations have occurred and water has begun to trickle through all the pores of the sandstone and through every crack in our wooden walls. Existence on the Schratz is most picturesque!

The Boches, who represent in the human species a genus quite distinct from that of the French, but who are men all the same, cannot be taking any more pleasure in this snow than we are. They must even be less satisfied, because the charm of outward beauty (at any rate its more subtle shades) generally fails to touch their obtuse souls. Not that reverie is unknown to them, nor that they are strangers to sentimentality; but that their domain is that of intricate allegories. They perplex themselves with sterilizing analyses, exhaust themselves in endlessly ramified dissertations. The psychology, so grossly "objective," since they glory in it, is methodical, without either originality or colour. They are sentimental rather than sensitive, intellectual rather than intelligent.

November 19.

The weather is beautiful—marvellously beautiful with this virgin snow, unsullied by anything, save, now and then, by shells.

The nights are wonderful. This whiteness, this silence, and the moon which slowly rises amidst the shattered trunks of the pines, standing like the abandoned columns of very ancient ruins, and the shadows of which form long oblique lines, the cold which seems to descend with the light from this motionless sky, the solemn calm and majesty of these mountains with their unsurpassably serene summits, perhaps also the vague thought of the destiny which has guided us here, or else the wandering souls of all those who rest in peace under this shroud—all this fills one with inexpressible emotions. Truly, how small, how very small one feels in the presence of the eternal mystery! Can the existence of a single one of us have any purpose in this universe?

November 23.

The weather is still very fine, the air as mild as on a spring day, and the snow is beginning to melt. Look out for trickles in the shelters! This beautiful sun does good all the same. The men, in front of their shelters, with hands in their pockets and pipes in their mouths, warm themselves in its caressing rays. What fine fellows these *chasseurs* are! They have, as is only natural, the defects of all troopers; they are indolent, bodily and mentally lazy, or sometimes display the mentality of semi-

soldiers; and, of course, it is necessary to shake them, to speak to them rather strongly, from time to time, in the forcible language of the military profession. But really they are fine chaps! When one thinks of all they have got to endure, of those they have left behind, sometimes without resources, of the ruination or uncertain state of their businesses, of the life they lead here in the cold and in the mud, shod with boots that are often leaky and clad in uniforms that are extraordinarily bad fits—when one recollects, on seeing their grease-covered hands, that they spend weeks without being able either to wash, or change, and when one sees them, in spite of everything, cheerful and smiling, amusing themselves over nothing like the children they are, joking about everything, about themselves as well as the Boches, and retaining at the bottom of their frank look the same expression of honest *naïveté*, one cannot help esteeming, admiring and loving them. Behold the real heroes, the real saviours of the country, the real Frenchmen! They have not the least idea of it—they have not the least idea of any great thing. They are the backbone of the country ; they are the men who will conquer, but it is not certain they will be aware of it.

We officers will never possess that simple, natural virtue ; it is not in our *rôle*. Moreover, we are too well informed about everything, too educated, too interested in ourselves. We are beplumed and bear the honour of responsibilities which are only made light thanks to them. We are always rather moulded by the feeling of our importance and governed by the urgent demands of our duties. That creates in us a

sort of constraint which very often diminishes our share of activity as regards ourselves. The men, on the other hand, have nothing to gain for themselves and everything to lose, or at least life, which is already something.

We shall very shortly be leaving the Schratz. Our brigade will occupy the neighbouring sector, to the north of this one—that is to say, the region of the Lac Noir and Lac Blanc, from Pairis and the Tête de Faux. The 14th, which preceded us here, will succeed us there.

*November 28.*

Intense cold, heavy snow, radiant sunshine everywhere. It is magnificent and dazzling; it makes one's ears tingle, but the soul dilates at the same time as one's lungs.

We left yesterday evening at twilight on a reconnaissance and only returned this evening, after an enchanting excursion, to set off again shortly, at dusk. What an enrapturing, beneficent and splendid winter with this keen cold, this crunching snow, these sunrises and sunsets one is never tired of admiring on the roseate mountains!

What about the Boches? Little we care for them! Moreover, we do not see them, as they remain in their holes.

PAIRIS,

*November 29.*

Since last night we are the inhabitants of a new domain with which everybody declares he is de-

lighted. This valley of Pairis, which descends from the Lac Noir towards Orbey, is indeed an exceedingly pretty corner, and must have been a delicious goal for an excursion when all these houses, scattered along the slopes of the meadows, possessed a soul and a hearth. Now, everything is a desert. Doubtless there are still many people who live between the limits of this circle of Pairis, but in hiding. Among all these pretty houses with neat walls, big thatch and slate roofs, there are hardly any which are not shattered, pierced, or mined. All the inhabitants left last summer, much later than those of neighbouring valleys, because all were French in character, language, customs, and heart. But the Boche gunners were all the more anxious on that account to destroy their houses; and it was absolutely necessary for the occupants to depart.

I had already been at Pairis before on a reconnaissance—last winter, in February, when the worthy *Curé* received us at his table and under his roof. Sisters of Mercy still kept the school, attended by the children in spite of the daily shells; and I recollect having heard in the morning, in the neat and pleasant little church, praying and singing in French.

Notwithstanding this desolation and the holes in roofs and walls, the houses still offer precious resources; we do our cooking there and still use the few undamaged rooms, until they in their turn are struck. Almost all have good cellars, which serve as quarters; in such sort that the men, on leaving the Schratz, found themselves in paradise; and all

the more so as the trenches are well fitted up, are provided with comfortable shelters and are relatively distant from those of the Boches, where, moreover, invariable quietness reigns. This place, therefore, is already a rest. The gallant *poilus* wash, change and warm themselves—of which they were greatly in need.

I command a sub-sector comprising three companies of the 11th Battalion, including my own, and two companies of territorials. My sub-sector is very extensive and to see its whole length in detail will take three days. I rejoice that my position permits and even requires me to move about, for one has great need of exercise after weeks in the trenches. These prospective excursions are beneficent diversions. True, a few shells fall here and there; but there is room for everybody, and it would be an extraordinary accident if one of them were to fall just on the spot where I was.

### *December 3.*

It is still raining—raining as though it would never stop. This morning, an immense rainbow, stretching over the valley from one mountain to another, momentarily appeared in the sky; but such furtive apparitions are very quickly obliterated, enveloped in the tentacular “scarfs” which stretch out in all directions. Whereupon the downpour recommences and the wind, continuing its wild race, drives the rain along in fine particles, just as it sweeps the sands of the desert before it. One can distinctly see the rain passing in a sheet,

in a succession of waves, one racing after the other. Among these stern-visaged mountains, in these restless forests, and on these deserted slopes, the tempest puts no check on its frolics. The pines, swaying from side to side, bending, and brushing against each other, producing a sound like the roaring of the tide, must be the accomplices of this fierce wind. They are accustomed to play together; they fight and defy each other voluptuously, like indefatigable companions who have struggled for centuries. It is the clasp of two gigantic forces, which attract each other and take form one through the other.

Are such scenes repeated everywhere in nature for the sake of the senses and souls of us wretched men? What a strange mystery these powers are which dominate us from so great a height and in the presence of which we refuse to believe ourselves worthless! This storm, which has been raging for three days incessantly, bending the ancestral pines of the forest as though they were slender heads of corn, transforming the face of the mountains, and making the earth tremble, disturbs us hardly at all. Although so weak, so light before the irresistible blast of the hurricane, we are conscious of our strength and of our immortality. Where can that feeling come from if we have sprung from nothingness and are to return to it?

Rest assured that I lack nothing; that I have not only everything indispensable, but much that is superfluous, and that the majority of those who are fighting at this moment would be very glad to have a part of all I possess. For you send me even dainties, and

I should be telling an untruth if I told you I do not appreciate them.

But I am chiefly grateful to you for the boundless affection of which these *gâteries* are but one of the thousand and one manifestations, and chiefly for all those prayers—your own and those you obtain for me around you—which are the most precious and highest expression of your tenderness. God bless you for it!—for we ourselves remain, in spite of our efforts, far in arrear with our debts. Above all, may God grant you, as a supreme gift, that peace which enables one to accept all burdens and all sacrifices with equal serenity. The thought sometimes comes to me that it would perhaps be better for me not to survive this war, for fear that afterwards my life might not be worthy of the gifts I have received. But my life will be according to the will of God. . . .

*December 9.*

Pitiless squalls of wind are coming from the west, howling incessantly. This voice, repeating its complaint indefinitely, is mournful and obsessing. At one time it swells, grows louder, becomes like the shriek of a hooter; at another it is deeper and more discreet, like the roaring of a stove.

Inside my hut, one can hear first of all that faint drawling note which comes from above, below, everywhere and nowhere; and one also perceives, as a more definite song, the rushing of the air between the bare branches of the trees and the pine needles.

That song is not sinister like the other; it is simply the murmur of the trees, replying to the tempest. But the other, that insidious music, at once distant and near, which rises to furious crescendos, falls again, grows lower, becomes almost sweet, and then swells afresh, that universal moan has something poignant about it: in passing it seizes your soul as though to turn it inside out or twist it; and one might think that it drags with it all lost or sorrowful spirits.

At this part of the front the lines are fairly distant and separated by an entirely neutral valley. Consequently we are not in contact with the Boches, although their patrols and ours move about fairly often in the valley. There even remain, between the lines, a few inhabited houses. The occupants never show themselves during the day and are revictualled from Orbey during the night. That is all the same rather curious. Since the Boches have let them remain there, their presence is not harmful to them and it may even, probably, be of some use. Consequently, everything leads me to regard these people as suspicious, and I have strongly urged the company, in front of which these dwellings stand, to bring the occupants into our lines if they can get hold of them. If you make war, especially against the Boches, you must do it absolutely. I have never understood nor shared the scruple which has caused our artillery to abstain from bombarding all those villages in which the Boches sprawled under our very eyes. It is true civilian inhabitants were there; but on receiving the first shell they would probably have left, and then . . .

PAIRIS,  
*December 12.*

I have just spent part of the afternoon walking in a deluge of rain. Fortunately, we possess at Pairis a spacious cellar, comfortably fitted up by those excellent territorial officers who welcome us here with such perfect cordiality. Just imagine!—in this cellar we are lighted *à giorno* by electricity. At only a few hundred metres from the Boches. Admirable.

For since yesterday I am definitely at Pairis, where I have rejoined my company.

Yesterday and the day before patrols from Noirmont went to fetch the inhabitants who had remained in their houses in front of the lines. They brought back a man, two old women and a young mother with her baby. The poor folk didn't know what to think. It was not a pleasant job to remove them in this way on the spur of the moment, but really, considering what this war is, we could not leave them between the lines, nearer to the Boches than to us and, moreover, revictualled by their troops. This evening another patrol is going to try to bring back two cows left in one of the houses. Ours is a funny calling.

*December 14.*

The days succeed each other and slip by very quickly, without noteworthy happenings. We come and we go, we walk about in the meadows, in the streams or along the roads, which is practically the

same thing; for tiny rivers flow on all sides, everywhere where their fancy or the declivity of the ground impels them.

We live a cheerful life in our cellar. The best humour reigns at table, around which are always grouped ten guests or so; for Pairis is frequented by numerous visitors who know they will find a hearty welcome here. At night we sleep like dormice in this huge cellar which is, decidedly, one of the most exquisite places I have known. In brief, we lead a perfectly agreeable life.

**PAIRIS,**  
*December 15.*

A splendid day with a pale sky, the cold fairly sharp but dry, and hardly modified towards noon by the uncertain sun, which seems to have no more strength left in it to rise, and which barely gets higher than the pines of Noirmont at the highest point of its course. Pairis receives only its oblique and timid rays, which hardly warm it, but light it up with a pretty veiled light, roseate and discreet.

A fairly lively artillery duel; also many aeroplanes which circle and whir in the blue, pursued by white shrapnel. At nightfall we meet in this sumptuous cellar, some of us to write, others to play bridge, others again to peruse the illustrated periodicals or the newspapers. A pleasant "Pairisan" life! Only the Boches are quite near; a fact which takes away none of the charm, but merely interrupts it now and then.

*December 17.*

I have visited various points of the sector this morning, accompanied by my excellent comrade, De Beauvoir, with whom I get on admirably—as admirably as with Captain Boissard, who is indeed one of the most interesting and sympathetic companions I have met since the beginning of the war. We thus make the acquaintance of the most varied people, even in our area, which is certainly one of the most isolated in this respect.

No atmosphere could be more favourable than that of war for seeing under their best aspect those new faces we meet one day and often leave the next, never to see them again. I have very rarely felt antipathy for these chance comrades; almost always we find ourselves in a sympathetic atmosphere, even with men whom in ordinary times we should have found distant. To-day they are Frenchmen, and that is saying everything. How insignificant the petty differences of opinion of former days appear through the prism of the “sacred union,” which is not a vain expression whatever people may say. Rubbing shoulders with all sorts and conditions of men is an amusing school and undoubtedly profitable. But, on the whole, those we have agreed to call soldiers are somewhat rare in this school, by which I mean the main body of the army (they are perhaps less so on the staffs). A sub-lieutenant of my company, a journalist and man-of-letters by profession, declares, not without pride, that “it is the civilians who are fighting.”

*December 18.*

Once more we are on the eve of a departure. To-morrow evening, in the night, we shall bid farewell to Pairis, its little grey chapel, its grey slate roofs pierced by shells—to this bower as calm as a country house—to this hospitable cellar, enlivened during a few days by our cheerful chatter. We shall immediately ascend to the Lac Noir, whence we set off the day after to-morrow to go into quarters at Saulxures, near Remiremont. Therefore we shall not be celebrating Christmas here. I dare not say that I regret it, since we are going to rest, and above all because one must never regret anything. Anyway, I shall retain a delightful recollection of this little nest. In spite of the Boches, their shells and their “old iron,” we have spent a most pleasant time here in excellent company.

*December 19.*

After a beautiful day, pallid and cold, comes an evening flooded by the light of the moon. It is freezing. The stars twinkle through a veil of fog. We are leaving . . . we are leaving . . . The religious quietness which reigns on the mountain this evening makes this a melancholy farewell. To-morrow evening we shall be in quarters, in houses and under roofs. . . .

*December 21.*

To-day I write to you from what is to us a new district, from Zainvillers, near Vogney, twelve kilo-

metres from Remiremont and eighteen from Gérardmer. Zainvillers is a small village where you hear neither shells nor bombs, nor anything Boche. In spite of the habit we have acquired of living almost everywhere, away from the ordinary conditions of modern existence, in spite of the undeniable savour and picturesqueness of the improvised installations in the heart of the wood or on the mountain, we feel a certain satisfaction in spending a few days in this way far from our enemies the Boches.

We do not know how long we shall be here. It matters little. Sufficient for the day is the happiness or difficulty thereof.

*December 22.*

We are buried in snow. The pines, in rows one above the other on the slopes, are weighed down under their white load. The sky is invisible; a thick fog hides the summits which surround us; it is indeed a true winter day, with everything grey and white.

The village which shelters us is a dull place. One hardly ever meets anybody outside. The women, busy with their house-work, go out but little; the men are almost all at the war. Only the children give a little animation to the streets when they pass in noisy bands on their way home from school. The *chasseurs*, who are in quarters here for the first time, arouse tremendous interest in this young France. As soon as we arrived, the whole place rang with the noise of the youngsters, running from one end of the village to the other, shouting: "Here

are the soldiers! Here are the soldiers! Here they come!" If fire had been raging at the four corners of Zainvillers they would not have been more excited.

It is the first time, in fact, that the mountain infantry have come to stay here, so it is not astonishing our arrival created a sensation.

There will be no midnight mass, neither here, nor at Vogney. The higher authorities have forbidden it, as many of the men might make it an excuse for spending the night in drunken rowdiness.

There is vague talk of an early offensive in Alsace. . . .

*On the way, December 23.*

The days are not always alike. . . . Rain, snow, mud, mud, mud . . . transports in all weathers and by every means.

We live in the midst of complete uncertainty as to the morrow, or even as to the evening. Real warfare is beginning again. . . . Between two marches, we stop a few hours to eat and sleep. However, all goes well. . . .

Moosch,  
*December 24.*

The day before yesterday, whilst we were beginning to instal ourselves at Zainvillers, we received orders to be ready to leave in the evening. A little after eight o'clock motor-lorries took us up and carried us to Cornimont, where, in a pelting rain and

amidst a merciless mud composed of water and melted snow, we arrived at 10 p.m. After a night's rest at Cornimont, we set off yesterday afternoon for this little Alsatian village of Moosch, in the valley of the Thur.

We have no orders for to-day, but everything leads us to believe that we shall not remain long at Moosch. Many people and much stir and movement in this little district where all the inhabitants have remained, and where, amidst the splashing of mud, commissariat wagons, lorries full of shells, civilian vehicles, soldiers of all arms and all uniforms, pass each other. For some days past there has been fighting near the Hartmannsweilerkopf. Yesterday evening the sky was lit up by the flash of the guns in that direction, accompanied by a distant booming. We may indeed be going there when we leave here to-morrow. This morning we were awakened by a few shells which fell by chance in the village. It is still raining.

*December 25.*

A very uncommon Christmas Day! Suddenly leaving Moosch yesterday evening, we marched the whole night along muddy roads and at 4 a.m. reached the pines on the western slopes of the Vieil Armand, where we are installed, as well as possible, in holes and shelters which have nothing gorgeous about them. As everybody was tired out, we stretched ourselves on the beds we found to sleep, awaiting . . . The *marmites* hardly stopped crashing the whole night. This morning the uproar increased, and on all sides

there is still the continuous booming of guns. There is heavy fighting towards the south; in the direction of the plain of Alsace we can hear a formidable rumbling. As the soldiers say, "it's getting devilishly hot!"

Last night, when passing round the slopes of the Hartman, we saw the lights of Mulhausen twinkling on the great plain; and further away, the luminous lines of the quays of Basle. What an impressive spectacle!

My company, detached from the rest of the battalion, is here ready to reinforce the line in case the Boches threaten to outflank the positions taken by the 28th Battalion on the slopes of the Hartman. What music for Christmas!

*December 26.*

For several days and nights the sky has drenched us with steadfast prodigality. It is not cold; the bare and chaotic summit of the Vieil Armand itself is completely free of snow, and up there, as here, the pitiless rain is falling.

We are still at the same place, among the pines of a little valley south of the Hartman. The shelters we occupy, and which, truth to tell, hardly merit that appellation, are invaded by water and humidity, and possess, in addition, the inestimable advantage of being much sought after by the shells of the Boches.

To say that this sojourn of ours is delightful would evidently be a slight exaggeration, but we might be worse, and certain battalions, which

have led the attacks of recent days, might envy us.

The abominable weather has hampered the operations begun on December 21. Yesterday and to-day, violent cannonades. Yesterday afternoon we nearly received a fine 130 mm. shell (the genuine article). The three officers of the company and myself were in a vaguely armoured shelter, awaiting the end of the bombardment which made walking about in the open air at least picturesque. Two *marmites*, one after the other, fell a few metres from the shelter; a few minutes later a third struck the edge of the shelter, which gave way without getting obstructed; and, severely shaken, we were for some seconds completely stupefied in an atmosphere of acrid smoke. Fortunately no one was hurt. We all four got off with a violent shaking without importance and a singing in the ears which gradually disappeared. We jumped into a neighbouring shelter, and the bombardment calmed down or was directed to some other point in the evening. We had a narrow escape for Christmas Day.

This morning the shells were less precipitous. But the day is not over. You will have learnt from the *communiqués* that we have made a great advance on the northern and eastern slopes of the Hartman. Preceded by a formidable artillery preparation, the attack, it appears, was led with admirable spirit by several corps. A certain regiment of the Vosges of glorious reputation (the 152nd) quickly gained a good deal of ground. Unfortunately insufficiently supported, and much in advance compared to neighbouring troops, it was outflanked the next day. . . . As to the 28th Infantry, whose attack filled

all who witnessed it with admiration, it captured in a few minutes and with almost insignificant losses a strong position, the Hirtzstein rock, taking 150 prisoners there. Up to now it has retained everything, in spite of a counter-attack the Boches made the day before yesterday. The latter are now contenting themselves by furiously bombarding with big calibre guns the first and second lines and the communication trenches. It is that which has led to our being knocked about in this way since we have been here.

Whatever happens, let us have confidence in God and await events without either apprehension or disdain.

From the lines I went over yesterday and this morning one has an admirable view of the plain of Alsace, which starts at the base of the last slopes we occupy and stretches out of sight until it mingles with the grey of the sky. It is entirely grey itself and entirely soaked with water. At night one can see quite well the twinkling of the thousand lights of Mulhausen, and farther off those of Basle. But the shortened perspective and the obscurity make these lights appear quite near. The punishment of Tantalus!

But when one must advance, one discovers that it is hard to do so, and that to capture a little bit of this country, so stubbornly contested, has already been costly.

The 11th Battalion wished to make the acquaintance of the Vieil Armand. Now we are there! . . .

*December 27.*

MY DEAR MAXIME,—

I should have liked to have replied in detail to each of your letters and to have thanked you for every one on receiving them. But for several days past our time has not been our own, and circumstances have left us little leisure.

Yes, I thank you with all my heart; and you cannot imagine the good your letters have done me. We have exchanged ideas with each other so seldom. . . .

It is quite true that among brothers in families like ours, in which spirituality implies a deep unity of thought, intimacy exists, unconscious, even involuntary, without it being necessary to express it often. But, as you say, friendship is one of the great blessings and great aids of this world. Life is not so long nor so perfect that we can disdain the good it offers. Friendship is an elective form of charity, of that most evangelical virtue the whole code of which is in the precept, "Love one another." Goodness, charity, affection, friendship, even love, if we agree to free this word from the narrow sense in which it is often imprisoned—all spring from the same source. To seek for this source in ourselves would be wrong: it is in grace, it is supernatural. Everything comes to us from elsewhere; and in everything, in whatsoever we experience, we must search for that origin which also fixes our goal.

We come, not out of nothingness (our bones and our flesh alone are drawn from that), but from God.

Our soul is an infinitesimal part of His divinity. That which illumines it is the reflection of His perfection, and that which makes it vibrate is the gift of grace. The whole secret consists in knowing how to obey that voice, that discreet voice, but one ever ready to reply to us.

This appears very simple, and it should be.

We alone obscure our field by our modes of thinking and feeling—modes too personal and consequently bad.

Claude Bernard said: "If I knew one thing thoroughly, I should know everything." This maxim should be pondered over by all men of science, who readily believe they have conquered ignorance, whereas they are limited on all sides. But above this mechanism of the intelligence, of which science is the gymnastics, there is a feeling which is no more explainable than it is indisputable, or undeniable; there is faith; and it seems to me that we might borrow Claude Bernard's formula and transpose it thus: "If I believed one truth thoroughly, I should believe them all." For we must not claim to know: however far our knowledge may extend, it will ever be powerless to solve the only problems which are put, finally. The heart must soar above the intelligence and throw itself at the feet of faith, which beckons to it to come. He who has performed, a single minute of his life, an act of sincere faith, or who has offered up a fervent prayer, has attained greater truth than the most laborious genius. The faith of the charcoal-burner raises higher than the intuition of the greatest men of learning.

Very often the manner in which men judge and think may cause them to be mistaken as to the path of truth; the reason being that men are prone to error, and one can only ask them to be conscious they are ignorant. All we see in this world are appearances, forms and isolated effects; we cannot conclude anything from them. If the world caresses and flatters this or that person because he is intelligent, eloquent, rich or benevolent, we must not conclude he is a model of perfection to be imitated. The most perfect, most virtuous of men is perhaps the most obscure, most unknown, from his birth to his death.

But, in that case, where can we seek for the counsels, rules and discipline of which we feel the need? To whom can we go for the solution of the problems put for each of us? First of all to God, since He has the kindness to wish it; and, among ourselves, to those who wish for our good because they are God's delegates; to those, especially, who love us, because, to do good to any one, one must first of all and above all love him.

It was Père Gratry, I believe, who said: "To love is to desire the good of another." What a beautiful definition of friendship!

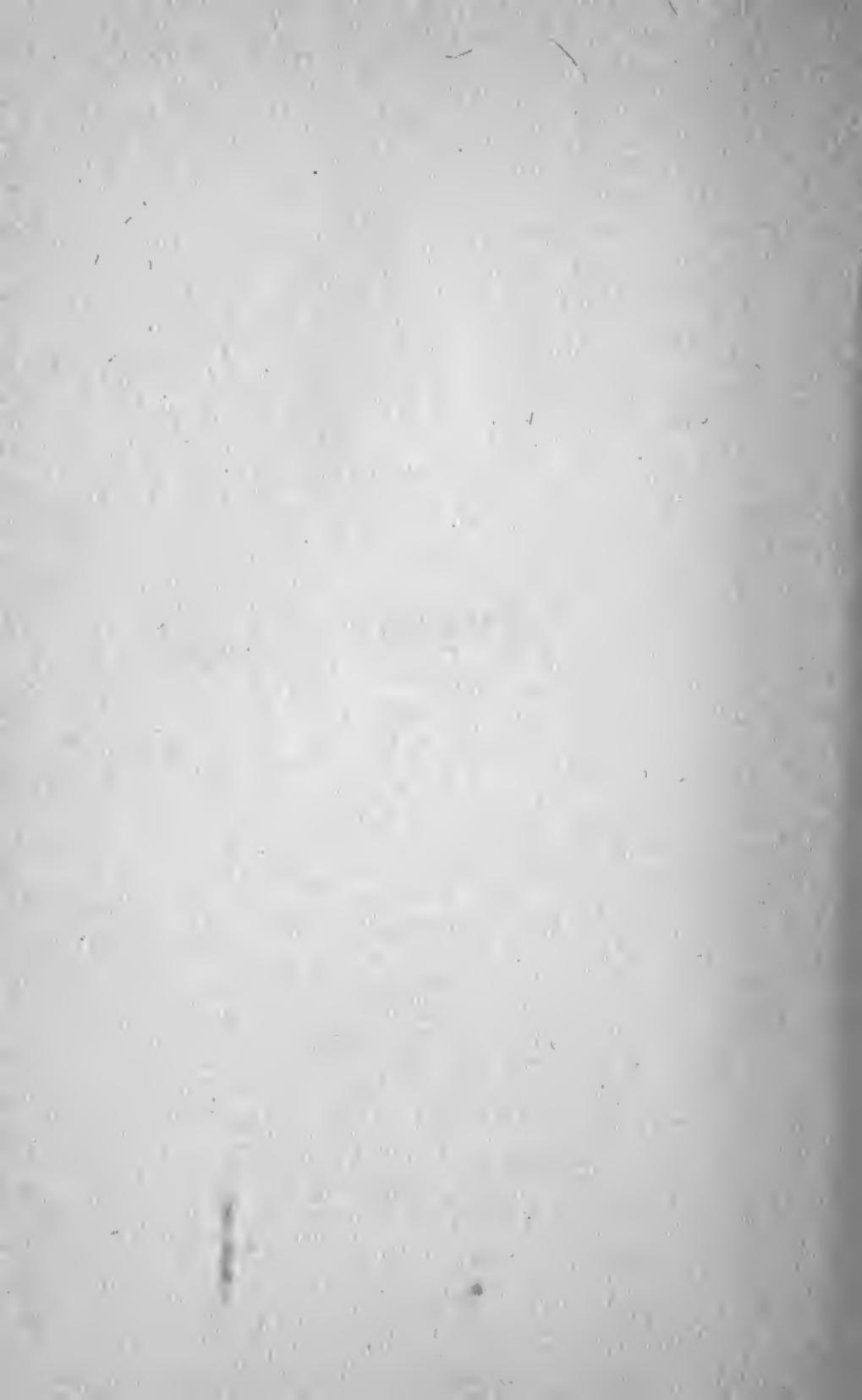
But I know not what I am writing to you; rather do I believe that, pen in hand, I am thinking with you. This is indeed a *conversation*, but at a great distance.

We are still surrounded by the thunder of the guns on the lower slopes of the Hartman, almost on the threshold of the bluish, rain-sodden plain of Alsace, which stretches as far as the hazy line

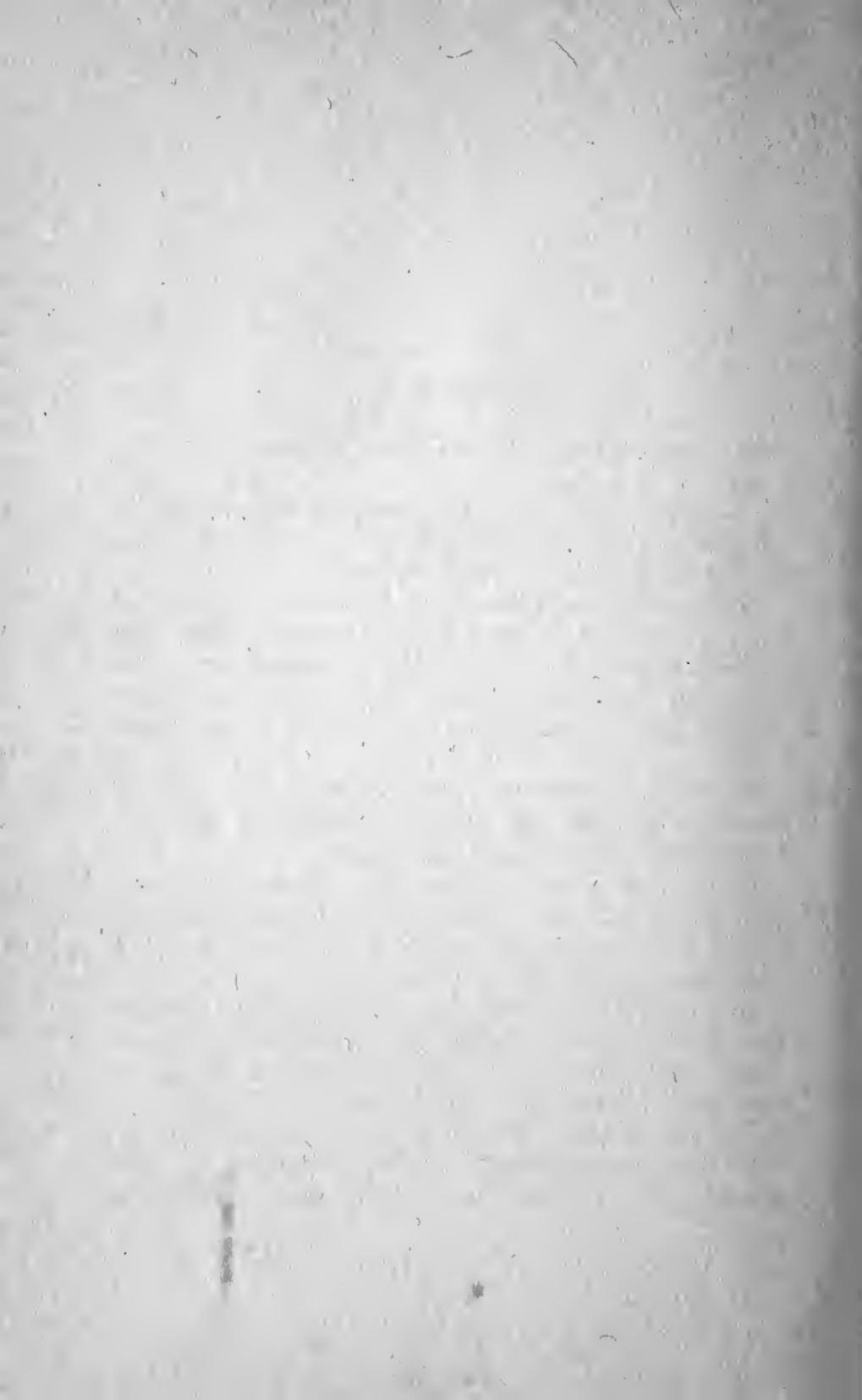
of the Black Forest. The Boches are bombarding furiously; our guns are replying. No attack yet to-day.

*Au revoir!* I charge you to embrace everybody at home as I embrace you with fraternal tenderness.

THE END



## **EPILOGUE**



## EPILOGUE

### *Letters from Lieutenant Verdant*

. . . With deep regret and heart-felt sorrow I carry out the painful duty entrusted to me by your son, M. Ferdinand Belmont, my captain.

During the engagement of December 28 last, at 4 a.m., your son, with a few *agents de liaison* and myself, surprised by a violent bombardment, was crouching under a shelter when a wretched shell-splinter struck my unfortunate captain on the right arm.

Immediately, with a courage worthy of the highest praise, he saw that he was fatally wounded. His arm was almost severed above the elbow.

It was then, with admirable coolness, that he charged me with the painful mission of informing you of the fresh misfortune which was to afflict his dear parents, already so tried by the war.

He charged me to tell you, sir, that his last thought was for his parents, that he regretted the sorrow his death would cause them, but that he was happy to have accomplished his duty to the end.

He was a brave and loyal fellow, much liked by his chiefs and especially by his subordinates. The officers and men of his company had a veritable

veneration for him. To his company and to myself, to whom he passed the command, this loss is irreparable.

*Extract from a letter written by the Rev. Father Jamin, Military Chaplain*

I learnt that Ferdinand died from hæmorrhage and retained consciousness until the end, arousing every one's admiration by his quiet courage and perfect resignation to the divine will.

“The last breath of heroes becomes the immortal breath of the country.”

(Déroulède.)

## MENTIONS IN ARMY ORDERS

### *First Mention*

*July 6, 1915.*

A doctor by profession, asked to fight in the ranks. Promoted to captaincy, has never ceased since the beginning of hostilities to give proof of the finest qualities of bravery, activity, coolness, and authority over his men; notably in the last engagements, when, at a single bound, and under a violent and incessant bombardment, he captured two lines of enemy trenches.

### *Second Mention*

*October 12, 1915.*

A doctor by profession, asked for employment as combatant-officer. Excellent company commander, brave and energetic. Entrusted on August 18, 1915, with the command of two attacking companies, he launched them to the attack with superb dash and in superb order. Already mentioned in army orders. Wounded once.

*Third Mention*

*February 5, 1916.*

A doctor by profession, asked to serve with the troops on active service. An excellent company commander and trainer of men, gave proof in all engagements of the finest bravery and of a very high sense of his duties as a leader. Seriously wounded on December 28, 1915, in the course of a violent bombardment, underwent the amputation of arm and died the next day.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Incorrect. Died the same evening before the arm was amputated.

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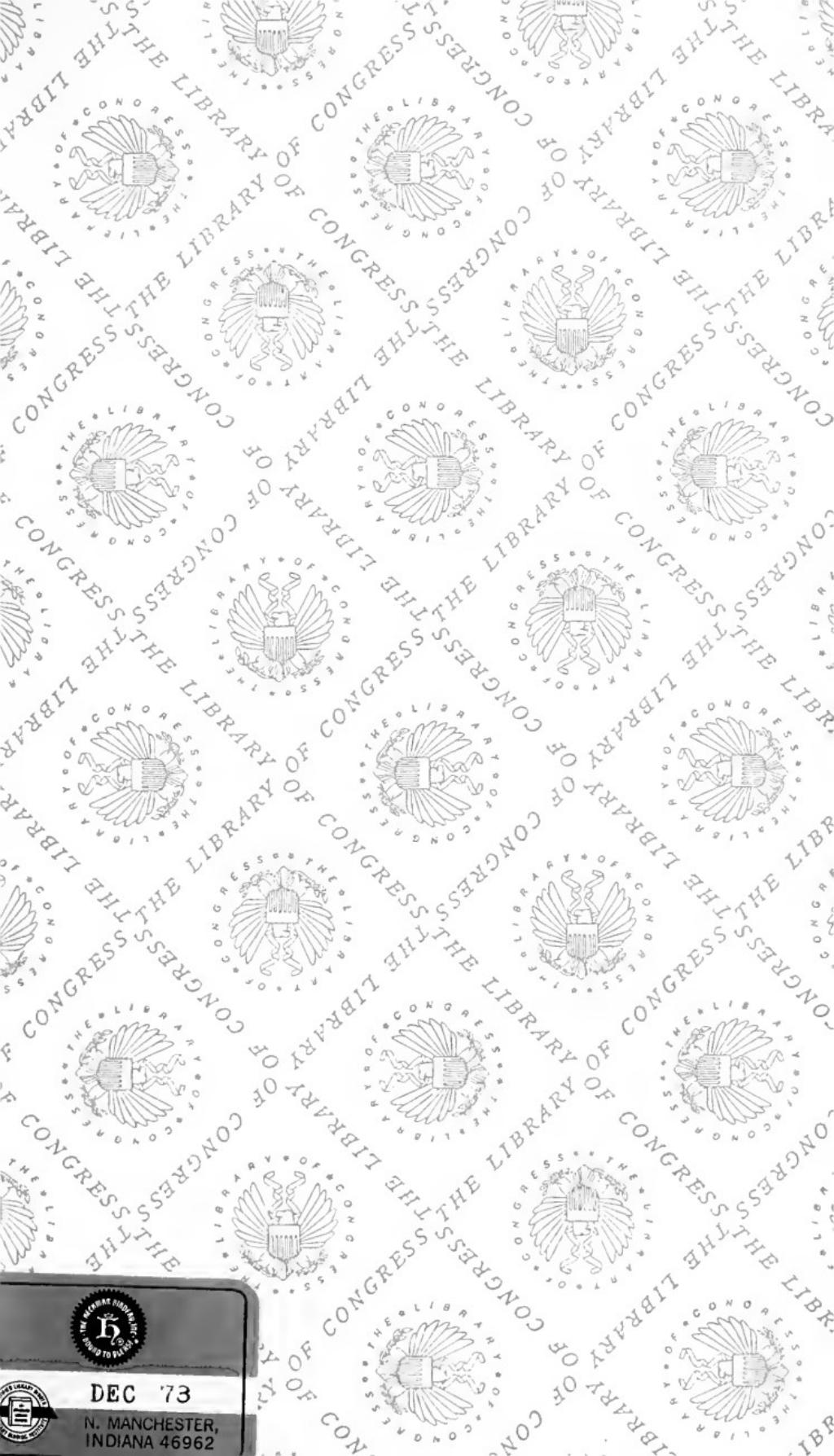






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